
Wrestling Observer Newsletter

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WORLD TITLE HISTORY

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Last week was the 95th anniversary of one of the most famous and talked about matches in pro wrestling history, the nearly five hour draw between two of the biggest stars of the first half of the 20th century, Ed "Strangler" Lewis and the person considered in many circles as the top man in the game at the time, Joe Stecher, on July 4, 1916, in Omaha.

With Frank Gotch, the biggest star in pro wrestling for the prior decade, fading from the scene, it was Lewis and Stecher who went on to become the biggest stars in the game for the next dozen or so years. Both were reputedly upper echelon shooters. So much of that was based in those days on things like gym reputation, the ability to control word-of-mouth among wrestlers and the ability to manipulate the media, so anytime anyone says anything definitive on that account needs to be taken with a skeptic's eye. Suffice to say, who was the best, or near the best in that era would be all speculation, and looking at match results, or for that matter, who had the most offense or got the best newspaper write-ups is irrelevant since almost every match by that point in time was worked.

What has made this match so well remembered historically, was both the idea it was not a work (and it likely wasn't), the length of the match (which legend for years had it going six hours), and that it involved two men who would go on to be the biggest names in wrestling of their era. Even this past week in a poll we did on the most famous pre-1950 match in history, it finished third, behind only the two Gotch vs. George Hackenschmidt matches in 1908 and 1911.

Lewis became the enduring star of the era, who remained a major public figure during the first television era of the 50s when he was the advance man, manager, traveling partner and real-life mentor for world champion Lou Thesz. At that point, Lewis was the guy who would be in the media, putting over Thesz like he was the real deal, and the sports people flocked to him because, even though it wasn't the case, Lewis' world titles in the 20s were seen as real and he was believed to have been the greatest in an era where wrestling was still real sport. He would talk up his six hour draw with Stecher, which became larger than life, similar to Helio Gracie's lengthy matches in BJJ history. In time, it became accepted fact that Lewis was on the verge of winning when it was declared a draw, because aside from those in the arena in Omaha, nobody saw it, and Lewis was great with the media and remained a public figure well into the 50s. Stecher, on the other hand, suffered a nervous breakdown and was largely out of public life by the end of the 1920s, retired to his farm in Dodge, IA.

Even though all accounts of the match when it actually took place were that it was terrible, that would actually to a degree corroborate the legend of it being at least in some form authentic, as years went by it became the ultimate shoot between all-time greats that was used as a measuring stick.

Plus, as bad as the match was, outside of Omaha, where it took place and where it was so bad the mayor held up both men's purse, it was talked of like it was a classic and led to a number of rematches. The two men had 19 major singles matches against each other, most positioned as either for the world heavyweight title, or a key match to determine someone getting the next title shot. Others credited shooting matches like this not being spectator friendly as being the reason pro wrestling became worked, but that is clearly not the case because pro wrestling was virtually all worked long before 1916.

In his book, "Hooker," Lou Thesz, a protege and best friend of Lewis, talked about how Lewis and Stecher did three legitimate matches that went a combined 11 hours.

"Virtually all of those minutes were spent warily stalking each other or locked together, almost unmoving, sometimes briefly on the mat. They

were tremendous contests, but they had to be absolute boredom for the average paying customer to watch."

In the end notes of the new book, author Kit Bauman said that press at the time indicated that the three matches in question actually lasted a combined nine hours, and the third of these matches, held in Madison Square Garden, was almost certainly a worked match. I can find records of two Stecher vs. Lewis matches in MSG, an April 26 1918, bout that sold out the building and went to a 90 minute draw, and a rematch on November 3, 1919, with George Bothner as referee, that Stecher won in 91 minutes, which was clearly a worked match because it was done to set up the January 30, 1920, classic title match where world champion Earl Caddock lost the title to Stecher and did a gate of nearly \$80,000, a record that stood for that part of the country until the days of Bruno Sammartino. Caddock-Stecher has been reputed to be a shoot, and there actually is footage that has survived from that period. It is either a shoot or an amazingly well worked match since there are no holes, and stylistically it is completely different from other worked matches of that era.

At that point in time, Gotch was still the biggest name in wrestling. While he wrestled after 1913, he had largely retired as a full-time wrestler that year after a win over George Lurich. His health was failing, as he passed away less than 18 months later from uremic poisoning (or syphilis as has long been rumored) at the age of 39.

The heir apparent to the throne as America's superstar wrestler seemed to be Stecher, a national amateur champion who was put over from the start of his pro career as someone unbeatable, beating almost everyone in two straight falls up to that point in time.

The rivalry dated back a year earlier. On July 5, 1915, Stecher won a version of the world title from Charley Cutler, in Omaha, before 15,000 fans. Gotch was actually at the show. Both Lewis and Earl Caddock helped train Cutler for the match. This set up interest in Gotch vs. Stecher as the big match. Some believe had the match happened, with Stecher being put over Gotch on his way out, that it would have greatly helped the industry. By never beating Gotch, Stecher was never fully accepted as world champion and no real transition from legend-to-legend was made, that would have established Stecher as the new superstar to the average person. Gotch was among the most famous athletes of his time. Stecher, while also relatively well known among sports fans in that era, never came close to reaching Gotch's level. Wrestling later boomed during the 20s, with Lewis as the dominant star.

Stecher and Lewis first met for the title on October 21, 1915, in Evansville. The match went two hours, with Lewis stalling and refusing to lock up, which would indicate the match may have been legitimate, although the finish would tell you otherwise. The idea of people doing a crowd-unfriendly shoot for two hours, killing the town, and then working a finish, makes no sense on the surface, but there were plenty of different variants of working and shooting in those days. A lot of the money made in the sport was based on gambling and manipulating people to bet a certain way and then cleaning up.

According to a biography on Lewis written by Steve Yohe, Lewis blocked all of Stecher's offense, but did no offense of his own. Stecher shot for takedowns and Lewis was able to sprawl and got behind him, but Lewis would let Stecher back up as opposed to working to finish him from that position. Then he would stall in the standing position. At about the two hour mark, Stecher went for another takedown and Lewis didn't have the room to sprawl, and instead fell out of the ring and hit his head on a chair. Manager Billy Sandow told the referee he was injured and couldn't continue. The ringside doctor disagreed saying he could continue. The referee, Bert Sisson, gave Stecher the first fall. In those days, they had a 15 minute rest period between falls where both competitors went back to the dressing room and rested up. Two other doctors examined Lewis and said there was no reason he couldn't continue. But he didn't come

out for the second fall and Stecher was awarded the win and retained his championship. The newspaper reports at the time indicated most watching it felt that Stecher would have eventually won, even to the point of saying there was no doubt about the eventual outcome.

But the mayor of Evansville, at the show, thought something was amiss. He got in the ring after the match, said the match was not on the square and had the Chief of Police hold up the gate and said it would be given to charity. The police claimed they had gotten telegraphs and phone messages telling them there was going to be a fake wrestling match. Lewis went to the hospital with a minor groin injury. Lewis and Stecher were never paid for the match.

Yohe theorized that because Stecher had beaten everyone quickly, and that at the time, fans didn't believe Lewis could beat him, that the real story behind this match is Lewis' side bet heavily based on the idea Lewis would last two hours with Stecher, when nobody up to that point had lasted 30 minutes. While they may not have been confident Lewis could beat Stecher in a shoot, with his great defensive skills, the idea was he could last as long as he had to, and as soon as he had to was over, he willingly lost the match. But there are so many holes in every story such as if they were working and agreed to a finish, Stecher had to know, and the referee should have known. The police being told about and being concerned about a fake wrestling match makes no sense since all but a small percentage of wrestling matches of that era were worked.

However, while this match hurt Evansville, the promotional ability of Lewis and manager Billy Sandow was such that it helped the feud on a national basis and made Lewis into a national star. They would tell reporters from other cities about the classic match where he was getting the better of Stecher for two hours, and they even claimed the match ended as a draw or a no contest and not a Lewis loss. Thus, when Lewis arrived in New York a few weeks later, he was considered the No. 1 contender for the world title.

The big rematch was in Omaha, drawing 18,000 fans outdoors for the rematch, the second biggest crowd up to that point in North American wrestling history, behind only Gotch vs. George Hackenschmidt in Chicago in 1911. The match was set for a 4 p.m. start with the idea by starting that early, someone would beat the other.

Lewis again was on the defensive and little happened in the fight. Stecher was even more wary in this fight than in Evansville, as he wouldn't even shoot for a takedown to allow Lewis to get behind him. Several times during the match, Stecher went to the down position and invited Lewis to ride him. This would indicate a worked match because you would never voluntarily do that in a shoot match, particularly against an opponent you are wary of. But again, the question becomes, if you were doing a worked match, why would you kill the city, particularly with such a huge crowd, by having a terrible bout? And if the idea was to swindle locals gambling on a fight by taking bets of how long the fight will last, then both guys should be in on it, and if they were, why was the match so bad?

At 8 p.m., it started to get dark. Promoter Gene Melady proposed that they stop the match and continue it the next morning, giving them all day to come to a decisive winner. It was said Stecher agreed, but Lewis and manager Billy Sandow felt any kind of a break would benefit Stecher and wanted to finish it that night, saying it was advertised as going to the finish. As it got dark out, cars were driven to surround the ring with their headlights put on, because the stadium they were playing in didn't have lights. It continued with nothing happening, including fans throwing seat cushions into the ring trying to prod both guys into action. Finally, the match was called and ruled a draw.

Once again, local authorities held up both men's purse, although unlike in Evansville, they did get paid when Sandow threatened to file suit. Both wrestlers were blamed for the match, but in Nebraska, more of the blame fell on Lewis because Stecher was the aggressor and also came in as the babyface and was the home town wrestler. For the rest of his career, Lewis was always a heel in Omaha.

There are once again a wide variety of theories as to what this was. Lewis being defensive and Stecher being afraid to be offensive would indicate either a shoot, or two guys who didn't trust each other and were afraid to work or put themselves in any kind of a jeopardizing position for fear the other would double-cross. Once again, the idea is Lewis was stalling out time because people in Nebraska bet on Stecher winning within a certain time frame. But if that's the case, then the match would be a shoot, because if they were trying to swindle bettors, they would agree to go a certain length and at least make it entertaining. The idea that they couldn't do moves that weren't legit because of all the gambling is sound. But both men worked enough matches to look like a shoot in their day. They should have been able to do that type of a match with each other and having it, maybe not be mainstream entertaining, but at least not being horrible and town killing.

Still, to everyone but those fans who were in Omaha, it became one of the legendary matches in history, two of the all-time greats, in their prime going five or six hours, depending on how far the exaggeration had gotten, in a classic match.

"We wrestled five hours without either of us securing a fall," said Lewis at the time to reporters, spinning the story of it being a classic, and how even though it was a draw, he was on the verge of winning. "At the end of the bout, which was halted by the referee, Stecher appear to be all in. His pulse was 125, and according to those who witnessed the encounter, he could not have stood the strain ten minutes longer. I offered Stecher a return match but he refused to accept it, saying he was through wrestling with me. I cannot account for his statement, as I always gave him a square deal in every one of our matches."

Three years later, as Lewis' star was shining, Sandow talked about the match.

"Three years ago, Stecher was hardly known outside of Omaha. He had, however, thrown every man he had met inside of 15 minutes. Out that way he was thought unbeatable and they said the man didn't live who could stay half an hour with him. Charlie Cutler, the American champion, had gone 25 minutes with him, and next to Joe, of course, he was called the second wonder of the world, in Omaha. I finally arranged a match between Lewis and Stecher, it was three years ago last summer.

"They met in the open air under a broiling Nebraska sun. The bout started at 1:30, and at 7 p.m., after five-and-a-half hours of wrestling, without either man being off his feet once, folks began to run automobiles up to the ring so that they could throw their headlights on the men, and they might see each other. At this late day they were just beginning to realize what a great match that was. Now, but they didn't then. They held Lewis's money up for four days on the grounds that there was something shady with the match. They couldn't believe that a mortal man could stay beyond a half an hour with their Joe. To show the stuff that the Strangler's made of, let me add that Lewis took a shower, had a light supper and danced until 4:30 the next morning. Ed Smith refereed the bout and he'll never forget it, or the heat either."

The two were major opponents for each other for the next several years, until they became the key wrestler for rival camps, at which point they became the ultimate dream match that couldn't take place.

Eventually, Lewis, Sandow and Toots Mondt became key players in the business with Lewis becoming the biggest star and world champion. Stecher became a top star for promoters largely on the outs. When Lewis was world champion in 1925, he dropped the title to a giant football player named Wayne Munn, largely to set up a rematch that was expected to be one of the biggest matches ever. Along the way, Munn was to defend the title against everyone but Lewis, and continuing to win as champion to build the showdown of the greatest wrestler against the unbeatable giant.

However, Munn was double-crossed by aging shooter Stanislaus Zbyszko, who was in the Lewis stable as a regular opponent of his. Zbyszko, who was one of Gotch's big rivals, put over Munn big in a previous match. Zbyszko never did jobs through 1922, but at this point had been booked to lose 11 major matches in a row to Lewis. Zbyszko may have cut a deal with the Stecher side before his title challenge to

Munn on April 15, 1925, where he was supposed to job on their way to Munn vs. Lewis seven weeks later. Instead, Zbyszko shot on Munn and beat him in two straight falls.

While one would think Zbyszko would have been blackballed out of wrestling for such a stunt, the reality was the opposite. Promoters were thrilled they could get the world champion without dealing with Sandow and Lewis and their asking price of a high percentage of the gate. Many of the top promoters were making him big offers. Zbyszko, who was either 45 or 47 at this time, didn't draw as champion, but got paid \$50,000, a ridiculous amount of money at that time, by a group that included Stecher, and brother Tony Stecher, to drop the title to Stecher in two straight falls on May 30, 1925, in St. Louis.

Lewis' side was able to get some states not to recognize the Zbyszko win and subsequent loss to Stecher. Lewis beat Munn, which still drew big, although nowhere close to what it would have done had Munn been champion. With the win, Lewis' crew billed him as world champion, but most knew Stecher had beaten Munn first and he was considered the real champion. They used the excuse that Munn went into the match with Zbyszko with a high fever, or tonsillitis, trying to somehow invalidate that unplanned finish. Lewis and Mann became regular opponents on big shows for the next year or so, with Lewis always winning. Promoters would offer big money for Lewis vs. Stecher, but first Stecher refused, and then when he publicly changed his tune, Lewis refused.

Finally the sides came to an agreement for a February 20, 1928, match in St. Louis, the first time the two men would have met for six years or more. Stecher, who had been the victim of at least two attempted double-crosses, one by Joe Malciewicz (he walked out on that since Malciewicz was not his announced opponent) and another by John Pesek (Pesek had Stecher in a submission but Stecher was saved by the referee thinking on his feet and disqualifying Pesek, who actually was pretty much blacklisted out of the business for months for that stunt). The match was pushed as if it was a shoot, and both men went into training camps to give that idea credibility. Lewis, usually 240 or more by that time, cut to 217.

People came from all over the country to see the last great shoot to determine the real world champion and top man in the sport. Among those at the match were the Mayor, two state senators, more than 50 reporters, many of the biggest stars in wrestling and virtually all the major promoters. But it wasn't a shoot. Stecher wanted out of wrestling, and was willing to lose the title to his rival for a big payoff. Stecher retired to his home in Dodge, IA.

While Munn was not the last big football player or non-wrestler to get the world title, nor the last time there was a double-cross in a world title match, the failure of the Munn title reign due to the double-cross led to a mentality among promoters that they wanted the world champion to be a real shooter so if there was an attempt at a double-cross, they had a guy who would at least not be a sitting duck for it. Munn wasn't the only case, as there was the example of Gus Sonnenberg being beaten up on a busy street as world champion that embarrassed the profession, as well as Dick Shikat hooking super draw Danno O'Mahoney and taking the title a decade later. Yet, historically over the next few decades, there were still plenty of world champions who were not top notch legitimate wrestlers.

But it was that mentality that led to Lou Thesz having such a long reign as NWA champion, because he could both draw and have the aura of a champion, but also he could carry the belt legit because of the idea most felt he was legit. Since the NWA champion defended his title worldwide, as opposed to working for one promotion, the fear of a renegade wrestler or promoter looking to embarrass the organization or champion existed in a way that it wouldn't have for a world champion who only worked for one office.

If you look at the NWA champions during the Sam Muchnick era, all were people who had reputations as tough guys. Thesz's reputation was as both a wrestler and a hooker, an expert on submissions. While Whipper Billy Watson was a performer and not a shooter, his title run was short, because Thesz was looking for a break. Dick Hutton was, even in the opinion of Thesz himself, a better wrestler than Thesz, which was why

Thesz hand-picked him to drop the title. But Hutton wasn't charismatic and didn't draw as champion. Thesz did lose to Edouard Carpentier, a title switch that fell apart when Carpentier's promoter, Eddie Quinn, had a falling out with the NWA and Muchnick. So that was an instance where the NWA was willing to go with a gymnast and not a wrestler as champion, because Carpentier was huge box office at the time. Pat O'Connor was an amateur champion and probably the most underrated worker of the post-television era. Buddy Rogers, who Thesz refused to drop it to even though the leading promoters wanted him to, was one of the all-time great heels and draws, but was not considered a tough guy. And Thesz's getting the title from Rogers was partially based on the idea that Thesz, who was 46 at the time, had a reputation that would instill fear in Rogers and keep him from not losing. Rogers himself believed as much, and from his own mouth, when Thesz told him in the ring at the start of their match, "We can do this the easy way or the hard way," Rogers wasn't the slightest bit defiant and did it the easy way.

While Gene Kiniski, Dory Funk Jr., Terry Funk and Harley Race did not have national championships in wrestling, all were considered tough guys during their primes. Kiniski was a very good amateur, and a huge man. The Funk brothers were sons of Dory Funk Sr., a real life shooter even though he was really only a junior heavyweight, and while both were football players growing up, they were trained in wrestling. Terry did policeman work for the promotion, and Dory may have as well. Race had a reputation as a tough street fighter from his youth. Jack Brisco was a national collegiate champion who, had he come along today, would have likely been an Olympic hopeful. It really wasn't until Ric Flair in 1981 that the idea of the champion being a shooter or street fighter for fear of the double cross was no longer a factor in picking the king.

Thesz was tested a few times, most notably by Paul Boesch and Kintaro Oki, and in both cases, he lived up to his reputation under fire. With Boesch, the later day Houston promoter sucker punched Thesz and knocked him silly. Thesz was hurt so badly he had to stay near the ropes, go on the defensive, until he shook the cobwebs out. When he did, he tied Boesch up in a move that today would be called the STF. Boesch tried to get to the ropes as Thesz put pressure on the move. Thesz never went into detail about how he handled the situation. Boesch, who ended up in later years being good friends with Thesz, ranked him as the single greatest world champion he ever saw. Boesch once told me about how he did something he shouldn't have done in a match with Thesz. Thesz put him in this hold that was painful and he needed to get to the ropes since Thesz wasn't playing around. As he tried to squirm, Thesz whispered in his ear, "Paul, as far as you're concerned, those ropes are a mile away."

With Oki, a noted gym shooter in his day, as silly as this sounds, the Japanese either sent him, or as a rib told him, to double-cross Thesz in a match in Houston and to take the title, and he'd return to Japan and it would elevate him to being the biggest star in both Japan and South Korea. He came after Thesz, and ended up going out on a stretcher.

JULY 20, 2011

Since it's Hall of Fame season (ballots go out in a few weeks with the issue in September), a new twist I wanted to look at this year is the major championship in the industry for a quarter-century, the history of the National Wrestling Alliance world heavyweight championship.

What I'm looking for is the number of championship matches the top challengers had during the year. This number does not necessarily prove who the best drawing cards or best wrestlers were in any given year, but to an extent it gives an indication of this much--the guys with the most title matches inherently were guys who were held in high regard for their ability to draw and to also have good main event title matches. What I'm looking for is long-term consistency on top and if there are names that come across stronger as Hall of Fame candidates because of it.

There are a number of flaws with this type of listing. The first is that the NWA champion didn't always spend most of his time in the hottest territories. For example, even when Vincent James McMahon was an

NWA member, he relied on his own people to draw, and didn't adopt the philosophy of so many promoters of building everything around the NWA title as the ultimate prize, since the world champion wasn't a regular. He built around the WWWF (later WWF) title, and actually because of promoting in major arenas and having long-term champions, Vince Sr. did a better job of promoting his championship than all but the best of the NWA promoters.

Similarly, wrestlers who frequented territories the world champion appeared in will fare better than wrestlers in territories he didn't. Another example is Roy Shire, who was not an NWA member until 1968, but was one of the leading promoters, but he revolved around his own U.S. championship as the ultimate prize, and very rarely used the world champion, because he didn't see the need in paying 13% of his gate (10% to the champion, 3% to the NWA office as a booking fee) when he was drawing fine with his own stable and championship.

I believe from 1970 through 1973, strong years, he never once booked the NWA champion, and when Jack Brisco was brought in during 1974 for a few shots against Moondog Mayne, the U.S. champion, it was always said in the buildup that Mayne's championship was just as important as Brisco's. During the heyday of Ray Stevens, even though the biggest stars in the business at the time were flown in to be his opponent (and world champion Pat O'Connor was actually brought to the Cow Palace even though Shire was not an NWA member, that's how hot the Cow Palace was at the time, to work underneath Stevens), he never received an NWA title match. During the heyday of the Los Angeles promotion, it often had its own world title. Later, while the champion appeared more frequently there than in San Francisco, it wasn't like many territories where the champion came in seemingly every other month, and most of the time the Americas' title was promoted like it was the main prize with the world title rarely mentioned.

The other is that records are incomplete. There is The Great Hise web site that lists world title matches that we are using as the source. For example, in the year 1951, there are listings for 158 championship matches for Lou Thesz. One would suspect that is the sizeable majority of those matches, but there's a minimum of about 15% and perhaps as much as 25 to 35% of matches during that or any given year that there are no remaining records of. But the site has more than enough to get a strong general idea of who was getting multiple title shots. Plus, your true top contenders were the type of wrestlers who would be brought in by promoters for a title shot, because at any given time historically your biggest stars were in demand throughout the country based on their names.

The term National Wrestling Alliance world heavyweight champion dates back to 1940 and Orville Brown as champion, based in Iowa. It wasn't until Brown in 1946 went on a tour of Montana that the championship was defended outside the state. In 1948, at a meeting of a number of promoters in Waterloo, IA, the famous version of the NWA was formed. And the NWA didn't really become what one would call the dominant wrestling championship in the industry until 1949, when rival promoters Sam Muchnick (the NWA member) and Lou Thesz (who had been the world champion of the National Wrestling Association, which was a championship recognized by a collection of athletic commissions) merged in St. Louis.

Largely through their efforts, the champion was generally considered the top guy in the sport until the 1984 national expansion of Vincent Kennedy McMahon's World Wrestling Federation and the ascension of Hulk Hogan. But even then, during the 60s, and again in the 70s, the then-WWWF champion Bruno Sammartino was a bigger draw most years than the NWA champions, and the WWWF champion worked in the big Northeast markets in front of larger crowds. Nick Bockwinkel was once approached by Fritz Von Erich in the late 70s about being the NWA champion, and he said at the time he was making \$150,000 per year as AWA champion working 15 dates a month in a territory. He figured he could make \$350,000 a year as NWA champion but would never be home, and felt the difference wasn't worth it.

Vincent James McMahon, the main promoter of the WWWF, withdrew from the NWA in 1963 when, in a power struggle, Thesz was brought back as champion. Many alliance members were unable to get dates on champion Buddy Rogers, who was booked by the Capital Wrestling

office of McMahon and Toots Mondt. It got so bad that several NWA promoters created their own world champions because they couldn't get Rogers into their territory and things got so mad that there were letters Muchnick sent to other promoters during that period saying that maybe it was time to give up on the alliance because it wasn't worth the headaches. But a few years later, the alliance was the strongest it ever was.

There were really two periods of NWA strength, the 1949 to 1957 period, when Thesz was generally recognized almost everywhere as the real world champion, and again from 1968 through 1983, when Muchnick was able to get a number of key territories back into the Alliance. McMahon's territory rejoined the alliance in 1971, although that was largely kept quiet from the public. McMahon still had his WWWF champion (who was referred to as WWWF champion in the 70s as opposed to world champion, as Sammartino was called in the 60s, although nobody really knew the difference and it was all semantics). For the first several years, McMahon never booked the champion or acknowledged the existence of another title on his TV until bringing in Harley Race for some Madison Square Garden shots in the late 70s.

It was in late 1983 at the NWA meeting when Vincent James McMahon, his son, the current Vince McMahon (who had purchased controlling interest from his father largely by raising \$250,000, and then using the profits from the company to pay a remaining \$750,000 in several installments—essentially the former partners like Phil Zacko, Vince Sr., Arnold Skaaland and Gorilla Monsoon were paid from their own pockets the way Sr. and Jr. structured the deal putting Jr. in charge) and Jim Barnett, the former NWA champion booker who had been hired on by them as Director of Operations, all withdrew.

The power fell from 1958 to 1960, when Dick Hutton and Pat O'Connor did not draw well as champion on their own.

The AWA title was created in 1960 when Verne Gagne purchased a controlling interest in the Minneapolis Boxing & Wrestling Club from Tony Stecher (the brother of Joe Stecher). Gagne had all the credentials to be world champion. He had become a national star through network television in the early 50s. He was legit, being a two-time NCAA champion. He was a very good, some would say great worker, old enough to have years of credibility as a superstar nationally and even internationally, but still in his prime. In hindsight, Gagne would have probably been a better draw as champion than either Hutton or O'Connor.

However, during the 50s, there was a conflict in Chicago, where, because of political pressure, NWA champion Thesz worked dates for a rival Chicago promoter of Fred Kohler and Barnett. They were mad about it, and Kohler and Barnett, who had the key national television, decided to stop using Thesz in protest. Instead, they created the United States television championship as their key title. They made Gagne as champion, and with their television, would book him out to promoters around the country for the same 10% of the gate that Thesz and the NWA were charging. While Thesz was considered by the fans as "the real world champion," Gagne had the advantage of being featured on television and ended up in big demand.

The alliance, and Thesz in particular, felt Gagne had undercut them and hurt their bookings, and thus Gagne was never considered for the NWA world title even though he had every qualification. He was known nationally, had the right look, was a great worker and had the athletic background and legitimate wrestling ability that they wanted the champions of that era to have.

Gagne created a storyline on his television in 1960 that O'Connor was being given 90 days to defend his title against Gagne, the No. 1 contender. Some noted Gagne had beaten Edouard Carpentier, who had won the NWA title from Thesz (this happened but was erased from history when Carpentier's promoter, Eddie Quinn, withdrew from the NWA and refused to book Carpentier like a champion because he wanted him in his territory three days every week). It was noted Gagne's record as a top star, and it had been years since Gagne had received a title shot. It was said that if O'Connor didn't defend it, he'd be stripped of it.

Of course, O'Connor had nothing to do with any of this, and when the 90 days were up, Gagne was declared the AWA world heavyweight champion. The title was originally recognized mostly in Minnesota (an offshoot was recognized in Nebraska), but over the years, the AWA expanded into Milwaukee, Chicago, Denver, Winnipeg and all points in between.

The WWA title, in California, was created when Carpentier came in as world champion in 1960, with the claim he had won the title from Thesz, and dropped it to Fred Blassie. What gave that title prestige is early on, Blassie beat former NWA champions Thesz and Hutton. Muchnick struck a deal with the Los Angeles office in 1968 to return to the NWA.

The WWWF title came in 1963, when McMahon Sr. didn't want Rogers to drop it to Thesz. The Toronto date was either the second or third attempt at a title change. Rogers claimed a broken ankle in a match with Killer Kowalski on November 21, 1962. In that match, Rogers claimed the injury early in the first fall, and lost the fall, and couldn't continue. They ruled Kowalski was not the champion because he didn't win two out of three, which was pretty embarrassing but it was really because the board hadn't approved of Kowalski to be the champion. Thesz had been scheduled to win it a few days later. Kowalski did pick up a lot of Rogers dates until Rogers returned on January 3, 1963, and three weeks later was the earliest they could get he and Thesz together.

Rogers then quickly lost the title to Sammartino on May 17, 1963, in 47 seconds with an over the shoulder backbreaker submission. This was not a shoot match, but like with Thesz, Sammartino at the start did tell Rogers that there better not be any funny business and hoisted him up right away. The idea of a 47 second main event, let alone title change, was hardly the mindset in those days, but it ended up kicking Sammartino's run off in a dynamic way because of the legend of winning the fastest world title change match in history.

Sammartino held the WWWF title for more than seven years before he asked out as champion because of the schedule. The NWA was aware of this title change according to most sources, and before Sammartino's win over Rogers, Thesz beat Sammartino in a match in Toronto. It should be noted Sammartino disputes this story. He said his title win and decision regarding him beating Rogers wasn't made when he had his NWA title shot at Thesz in Toronto on March 14, 1963, nine weeks before his WWWF title win.

At the time, Stanley Weston ran the most prominent wrestling magazines, and Vince Sr. asked him to pretend that the Thesz-Rogers title change in Toronto never happened. Weston didn't do it, which started an underlying feud between Weston and McMahon. McMahon tried to then say it shouldn't count as a title change because it was only one fall, and not two out of three, but he got undercut on that excuse when the NWA brought back a Thesz vs. Rogers rematch, a two of three fall match on February 7, 1963 in Toronto, which Thesz won again. McMahon then responded by ignoring Thesz, and instead of saying Rogers was still champion, talked about a new title being created in a tournament in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where Rogers beat Argentina Rocca in the finals, to become the World Wide Wrestling Federation world heavyweight champion. It was the first time the WWWF initials were used.

McMahon and Weston did work together because each needed the other, but it festered and was one of many reasons in 1984, when Vince Jr. created his own magazine, that he banned Weston's magazine from having any access to talent. That's why Weston's magazines, known in those days as the Apter Mags because the most prominent writer and photographer was Bill Apter, were so heavily in the NWA/Crockett side during the early years of the wrestling war.

There are also two key matches that never happened that are historically huge during the NWA's prime period. In 1949, with the merger in St. Louis, a wrestling hotbed since the 20s because Tom Packs had made pro wrestling such an important part of the local culture, the two world champions, Brown and Thesz, were to meet in a unification match on November 25, 1949. Brown was scheduled to win the match, which showed the power of the new alliance vs. the old alliance in that they would get their champion crowned even though Thesz was the better-

known national star at the time. The promise was that Brown would hold the title for one year, and Thesz would get to win it and hold it for the next year. '

However, on November, 1, 1949, Brown was in a serious auto accident which for the most part ended his career (he did wrestle again but was never the same). So Thesz became champion, for a one-year contract. Every year at the NWA convention, they would have the key promoters vote on whether to renew the contract. Thesz was always renewed until he asked out in 1957 because he wanted out of the schedule, had problems with many of the promoters and felt he could have a better life touring internationally as International champion—since news traveled slow but because of all the years on top in the U.S., Thesz was regarded almost everywhere as the world champion. Plus, he could book his own dates.

The second was in 1965. Muchnick and McMahon got over the animosity of the Thesz-Rogers situation. Muchnick always believed that for the good of the sport, there should be one world champion, noting how the sport was ridiculed in the 40s for having so many champions. While Muchnick never fully achieved his goal, he was able to make deals with most major offices around the world to recognize Thesz. But it fell apart when Rogers was champion.

A Thesz vs. Sammartino title vs. title match was scheduled, and showing the power of Sammartino as a draw, it was the WWWF champion who was scheduled to go over, with the agreement that he would hold it for one year, and then drop it to Thesz. This never happened. Sammartino was presented with a touring schedule where he'd be working 30 days a month as champion to hit both the NWA and WWWF key cities. He outright refused, because at that point he would virtually never see his family.

Thesz refused as well, wanting a \$100,000 guarantee to do the job, which both Muchnick and McMahon believed was outrageous. Plus, Thesz hated Mondt, and didn't like McMahon either, because during the period he was world champion, McMahon would never really promote him as champion. It was a double blame game, as Thesz was a strong draw as champion almost everywhere but the Northeast. Thesz blamed it on the promoters and what they promoted. They blamed Thesz's serious legitimate looking style of wrestling as not getting over in their part of the country. Part of the enticement to get Thesz back as a shooter to take the title any way necessary from Rogers in 1963 was it would be foiling McMahon and Mondt's attempt to steal the title, as the belief was they were going to book Rogers even less that year outside of their own territory and the Alliance was already crumbling by that point.

A funny part of that story is Rogers had put up \$25,000, a ton of money in those days, as the champion's bond to make sure that when the time came, he would drop the title. Muchnick came to Toronto with the \$25,000 and told Rogers that if he didn't lose to Thesz, they were giving the bond to charity, and told him he'd give the cash in good faith to McMahon and Mondt to hold until the end of the show. Rogers then told Muchnick not to do so, saying that he trusted Muchnick, who was his political adversary in this scenario, with his money, but not McMahon and Mondt, his allies. Now Thesz felt that after all that, they were giving them back the championship and he felt they would do the same thing, and never trusted after the year, he would be getting it back. He was probably smart to believe that.

Again, in looking at this, the key is, low numbers doesn't disqualify anyone from anything, because not every promotion was part of the NWA and some that were strong didn't book the champion. But this will possibly show some Hall of Fame candidates who have been overlooked, because if you have had a ton of title challenges over years-and-years, you are inherently one of the top guys in the business. In a sense I'm more interested in names that fall on the list over a long period of time, showing long-term stardom, than somebody who may have had a hot year or two, since generally speaking, that's what Hall of Fames are about. We'll study this more in the future post-1984. Even though some territories remained strong for one to three years after 1984, the business was completely different, as was the NWA title, which went from being a touring title to Ric Flair being part of the Jim Crockett national touring troupe, defending it mainly against the top babyfaces

who worked at the time for Crockett as opposed touring territories facing the top guys in every part of the world.

We'll start this look with the first year plus of the Thesz reign, starting with his being named champion at the Alliance meeting on November 27, 1949, through the end of his first full year at the end of 1950. That year, the clear-cut biggest contender was Wladek Kowalski, a few years before getting the Killer Kowalski nickname. He had 25 title shots based on records during that period. Others with the most shots were Enrique Torres (9), Rito Romero (7), Bronko Nagurski (6), Bill Longson (6), Rogers (6), Sonny Myers (4), Whipper Billy Watson (4) and Ruffy Silverstein (4).

1951: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz; Wladek Kowalski (12), Mighty Atlas aka Morris Shapiro (8), Ray Eckert (7), Enrique Torres (5), Buddy Rogers (4), Danny Savich (4), Emil Dusek (4); Mr. Moto, Yukon Eric, Duke Keomuka, Verne Gagne, Chest Bernard, Ray Gunkel and Bobby Managoff (3).

1952: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz; Mighty Atlas (10), Hans Schmidt (8), Bobby Managoff (7), Argentina Rocca (7), Verne Gagne (5), Ray Gunkel (5), Hombre Montana (4), Enrique Torres (4), Wladek Kowalski (4), Mr. Moto (4), Duke Keomuka (4), Ray Eckert (3), Bill Longson (3)

1953: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz; Ray Eckert (6), Killer Kowalski (5), Hans Schmidt (5), Verne Gagne (5), Gorgeous George (5), Argentina Rocca (4), Pat O'Connor (4), Ray Gunkel (4), Enrique Torres (4), Luther Lindsay (4), Mr. Moto (3), Ron Etchison (3), Hans Hermann (3), Bill Longson (3), Leo Nomellini (3), Sonny Myers (3), Juan Humberto (3), Bobby Managoff (3), Baron Leone (3), Duke Keomuka (3)

1954: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz; Ray Gunkel (8), Buddy Rogers (8), Bill Miller (7), Wilbur Snyder (7), Rito Romero (7), Johnny Valentine (6), Paul Baillargeon (5), Ronnie Etchison (4), Enrique Torres (4), Pat O'Connor (4), Lu Kim (3), Gorgeous George (3), Baron Leone (3), Mr. Moto (3), Luther Lindsay (3)

1955: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz; Pat O'Connor (7), Hans Schmidt (7), Wilbur Snyder (7), Don Leo Jonathan (6), Dick Hutton (6), Ray Gunkel (5), Ray Villmer (4), Buddy Rogers (4), George Gordienko (4), Johnny Valentine (4), Pepper Gomez (4), Lord James Blears (3), Yukon Eric (3), Argentina Rocca (3)

1956: Note that Whipper Billy Watson held the title from March 15 to November 9 when Lou Thesz asked for a vacation from the schedule; Thesz held it before and after that date: Hard Boiled Haggerty (10), Pat O'Connor (9), Pepper Gomez (8), Buddy Rogers (6), Hans Schmidt (6), Bobo Brazil (6), Lou Thesz (6), Mighty Ursus aka Jesse Ortega (6), Wilbur Snyder (4), Enrique Torres (3), Whipper Billy Watson (3), Gorgeous George (3), Luther Lindsay (3), Fritz Von Erich (3), Mr. Hito aka Kinji Shibuya (3)

1957: Lou Thesz held the title until June 14, 1957 when he lost to Edouard Carpentier. Based on a disputed finish, both Thesz and Carpentier held title recognition and defended the title until Carpentier's promoter, Eddie Quinn, quit the NWA and pulled Carpentier. A unification match was set for St. Louis that Carpentier would have won, as Thesz was leaving the NWA to tour overseas. Instead, the match didn't happen and Thesz lost the title to Dick Hutton on November 14, 1957: Don Leo Jonathan (7), Gene Kiniski (7), Whipper Billy Watson (5), Pepper Gomez (5), Sky Hi Lee (5), Ray Gunkel (4), Hard Boiled Haggerty (4), Lord James Blears (4), Edouard Carpentier (4), Lou Thesz (3), Roy Shire (3), Dory Funk Sr. (3)

1958: CHAMPION - Dick Hutton; Whipper Billy Watson (13), Lou Thesz (12), Gene Kiniski (6), Bill Longson (6), Buddy Rogers (5), Danny Plechas (4), Tarzan Zorro (4), Johnny Walker (3)

1959: Dick Hutton lost the title to Pat O'Connor on January 9 and O'Connor held it the remainder of the year; Lou Thesz (12), Dick Hutton (10), Pepper Gomez (9), Gene Kiniski (7), Tor Yamato (6), Don Leo Jonathan (4), Whipper Billy Watson (4), Joe Christie (4), Cowboy Bob

Ellis (4), Mitsu Arakawa (3), Fritz Von Erich (3), Bill Longson (3), Danny Plechas (3), Luther Lindsay (3)

1960: CHAMPION - Pat O'Connor; Pepper Gomez (8), Gene Kiniski (8), Torbellino Blanco (8), Whipper Billy Watson (6), Shag Thomas (4), Don Leo Jonathan (4), Dick Hutton (4), Soldat Gorky (4), Dick the Bruiser (4), Bobby Managoff (4), Tiny Mills (4), Tony Borne (3), Cowboy Bob Ellis (3), The Sheik (3), Luther Lindsay (3), Bulldog Lee Henning (3), Yukon Eric (3), Jim Wright (3), Crusher Reggie Lisowski (3), Kinji Shibuya (3)

1961: CHAMPION - Pat O'Connor (until June 30), Buddy Rogers (until the end of the year); Johnny Valentine (11), Dory Dixon (7), Crusher Reggie Lisowski (7), Sweet Daddy Siki (6), Hans Schmidt (5), Pepper Gomez (5), Bruno Sammartino (4), Johnny Barend (4), Dory Funk Sr. (4), Ronnie Etchison (3), Karl Von Hess (3), Argentina Rocca (3)

1962: CHAMPION - Buddy Rogers; Johnny Valentine (13), Bruno Sammartino (12), Argentina Rocca (12), Bobo Brazil (12), Giant Baba (9), Edouard Carpentier (9), Sailor Art Thomas (8), Moose Cholak (5), Mark Lewin (5), Billy Darnell (4), John Paul Henning (4), Bulldog Brower (4), Dory Dixon (4), Cowboy Bob Ellis (3), Pampero Firpo (3), Killer Kowalski (3)

1963: CHAMPION - Buddy Rogers (until January 24), Lou Thesz (until the end of the year); Bill Miller (13), Dick the Bruiser (13), Danny Hodge (8), Cowboy Bill Watts (7), Sammy Steamboat (7), Rito Romero (5), Tarzan Tyler (5), Karl Gotch (4), Nick Kozak (4), Bobo Brazil (4), Mark Lewin (4), Professor Boris Malenko (4), Gene Kiniski (3), Killer Kowalski (3), Ray Gunkel (3), Pat O'Connor (3), Hans Schmidt (3), Hiro Matsuda (3), Fritz Von Erich (3), Dan Miller (3)

1964: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz; Bob Orton Sr. (7), Karl Gotch (7), Sammy Steamboat (6), Johnny Valentine (4), Dick the Bruiser (4), Danny Hodge (4), Killer Karl Kox (4), Bulldog Brower (3), The Destroyer (3), John Smith (3), Johnny Weaver (3), Pat O'Connor (3), Don Leo Jonathan (3), Enrique Torres (3), Karl Von Stroheim (3)

1965: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz; Dick the Bruiser (12), Pat O'Connor (10), Cowboy Ron Reed aka Buddy Colt (6), Killer Karl Kox (5), George Scott (5), Danny Hodge (4), Don Curtis (4), Mike DiBiase (3), Bob Geigel (3), Johnny Weaver (3), Fred Blassie (3), Dan Miller (3), Sammy Steamboat (3), Abe Jacobs (3)

1966: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz (through January 7), Gene Kiniski (rest of the year); Lou Thesz (12), Fritz Von Erich (9), Dick the Bruiser (6), Eddie Graham (5), Don Curtis (4), John Tolos (4), Stan Stasiak (4), Bearcat Wright (4), Jose Lothario (4), Don Leo Jonathan (4), Missouri Mauler (3), Johnny Powers (3), Ernie Ladd (3), Buddy Fuller (3), Dory Funk Jr. (3), Edouard Carpentier (3)

1967: CHAMPION - Gene Kiniski; Lou Thesz (7), Don Leo Jonathan (6), Fritz Von Erich (6), Eddie Graham (5), Johnny Valentine (4), Pat O'Connor (3), John Tolos (3), Stan Stasiak (3), Dave Ruhl (3), Sailor Art Thomas (3)

1968: CHAMPION - Gene Kiniski; George Scott (7), Edouard Carpentier (5), Fritz Von Erich (5), Don Leo Jonathan (5), Lou Thesz (5), Abe Jacobs (4), John Tolos (4), Mr. Wrestling Tim Woods (3), Johnny Weaver (3), Dick the Bruiser (3), Ernie Ladd (3), Cowboy Bill Watts (3), Pat O'Connor (3), The Masked Professional Doug Gilbert (3), Bulldog Brower (3)

1969: CHAMPION - Gene Kiniski (through February 11), Dory Funk Jr. (rest of year); Johnny Valentine (5), Gene Kiniski (5), Hans Mortier (5), Dick Murdoch (5), Harley Race (4), Bulldog Lee Henning (4), Dale Lewis (4), Blackjack Lanza (4), Joe Scarpa aka Chief Jay Strongbow (4), Buddy Colt (3), Ronnie Etchison (3), Big Brutus aka Buggy McGraw (3), Lou Thesz (3), Rock Hunter (3), Super Inferno aka Tank Morgan (3)

1970: CHAMPION - Dory Funk Jr.; Jack Brisco (12), Gene Kiniski (6), Missouri Mauler (6), Thunderbolt Patterson (6), Pak Song (5), Johnny Walker (4), Nick Bockwinkel (4), Bob Orton Sr. (4), Danny Little Bear (4),

Bull Ramos (4), Wahoo McDaniel (4), Bearcat Brown (3), Dale Lewis (3), Great Mephisto (3), Rip Hawk (3), Mongolian Stomper (3), Rufus Jones (3), Ernie Ladd (3), Pat O'Connor (3), Ricky Romero (3)

1971: CHAMPION - Dory Funk Jr.; Cyclone Negro (14), Jack Brisco (10), Johnny Weaver (6), Dick Murdoch (5), Rufus Jones (5), Harley Race (5), Clubfoot Inferno aka Great Mephisto (4), Johnny Valentine (3), Boris Malenko (3), Jerry Brisco (3), Danny Little Bear (3), Mongolian Stomper (3), Pak Song (3)

1972: CHAMPION - Dory Funk Jr.; Jack Brisco (17), Mr. Wrestling aka Tim Woods (9), Cyclone Negro (9), Fritz Von Erich (7), Johnny Weaver (6), Lord Al Hayes (5), Pak Song (5), Dick Murdoch (5), Paul Jones (5), Cowboy Bill Watts (4), Johnny Valentine (4), Rufus Jones (4), Mil Mascaras (4), Black Angus Campbell (4), Danny Hodge (3), Jerry Brisco (3), Dingo the Sundowner aka Les Roberts (3), Buddy Colt (3), Red Bastien (3)

1973: CHAMPION - Dory Funk Jr. (until May 24); Harley Race (May 24-July 20); Jack Brisco (rest of the year); Dory Funk Jr. (9), Johnny Valentine (7), Mark Lewin (6), Harley Race (6), Terry Funk (6), Mr. Wrestling aka Tim Woods (6), Johnny Weaver (6), Jack Brisco (4), Lou Thesz (4), Danny Little Bear (4), Jose Lothario (3), Big Bad John (3), Cyclone Negro (3), Gene Kiniski (3), Dick Murdoch (3), Thunderbolt Patterson (3), Rip Hawk (3), Mongolian Stomper aka Archie Gouldie (3), Omar Atlas (3), Buddy Colt (3), Abdullah the Butcher (3)

1974: CHAMPION - Jack Brisco (except one week in December held by Giant Baba); Dory Funk Jr. (20), Harley Race (14), Dusty Rhodes (12), Mr. Wrestling II aka Johnny Walker (8), Pak Song (8), Cowboy Bill Watts (8), Buddy Colt (8), Paul Jones (7), Tim Woods (6), Terry Funk (6), Dick Murdoch (5), Johnny Valentine (4), Jos LeDuc (4), Blackjack Mulligan (3), Super Destroyer aka Don Jardine (3)

1975: CHAMPION - Jack Brisco (until December 10); Terry Funk (rest of the year); Dory Funk Jr. (15), Bob Roop (13), Harley Race (9), Terry Funk (9), Wahoo McDaniel (8), Mongolian Stomper (7), Paul Jones (6), Rocky Johnson (5), Dick Murdoch (4), Mr. Wrestling aka Tim Woods (4), Abdullah the Butcher (4), Ron Fuller (4), Cyclone Negro (4), Jose Lothario (3), Curtis Laukea (3), Jerry Oates (3)

1976: CHAMPION - Terry Funk; Dusty Rhodes (27), Jack Brisco (11), Paul Jones (9), Mr. Wrestling II aka Johnny Walker (8), Thunderbolt Patterson (7), Jose Lothario (7), Super Destroyer aka Art Neilson (7), Harley Race (7), Mike George (6), Wahoo McDaniel (6), Billy Robinson (6), Pat O'Connor (5), Rocky Johnson (5), Gene Kiniski (5), Fritz Von Erich (4), Swede Hanson (4), Chavo Guerrero (4), Abdullah the Butcher (4), Mike Graham (3), Rufus Jones (3), Leo Burke (3), Tank Patton (3)

1977: CHAMPION - Terry Funk (until February 6); Harley Race (rest of the year); Wahoo McDaniel (8), Harley Race (6), Dusty Rhodes (6), Mr. Wrestling II (6), Ron Miller (5), Dory Funk Jr. (5), Terry Funk (5), Ken Patera (4), Ron Fuller (4), Rocky Johnson (4), Superstar Billy Graham (3), Bob Armstrong (3), Jerry Oates (3), Jimmy Snuka (3), Ricky Steamboat (3), Al Madril (3)

1978: CHAMPION - Harley Race; Dusty Rhodes (14), Jack Brisco (13), Wahoo McDaniel (10), Ricky Steamboat (8), Blackjack Mulligan (7), Dory Funk Jr. (5), Terry Funk (5), Jos LeDuc (5), Dick Murdoch (4), Thunderbolt Patterson (4), Bruiser Brody (4), Tony Atlas (4), Paul Jones (4), Rocky Johnson (3), Ron Miller (3), Leo Burke (3), Al Madril (3), Stan Hansen (3)

1979: CHAMPION - Harley Race (Dusty Rhodes and Giant Baba each had one week title reigns); Dusty Rhodes (12), Chief Peter Maivia (8), Bruiser Brody (7), Ricky Steamboat (7), Tommy Rich (7), The Assassin aka Jody Hamilton (6), Steve Keirn (6), Jimmy Garvin (5), Dick Murdoch (5), Andre the Giant (4), Ron Fuller (4), Harley Race (4), Bulldog Bob Brown (3), Mike Graham (3), Wahoo McDaniel (3), Ron Garvin (3), Tony Atlas (3), Dick the Bruiser (3), David Von Erich (3), Ric Flair (3), Kevin Von Erich (3)

1980: CHAMPION - Harley Race (Giant Baba had a one week reign); Dusty Rhodes (11), Tommy Rich (11), Ric Flair (8), Mr. Wrestling II (8), Dick Murdoch (7), Tony Atlas (5), Bulldog Bob Brown (5), Manny Fernandez (5), Andre the Giant (4), Mark Lewin (4), Mil Mascaras (4), Bruiser Brody (3), Barry Windham (3)

1981: CHAMPION - Harley Race (through June 21), Dusty Rhodes (through September 17), Ric Flair (rest of the year): Harley Race (18), Dory Funk Jr. (15), Tommy Rich (14), The Assassin aka Jody Hamilton (13), Mr. Wrestling II (12), Jack Brisco (10), Dusty Rhodes (10), Ric Flair (7), Ted DiBiase (6), Wahoo McDaniel (6), Charlie Cook (6), Barry Windham (6), Ole Anderson (6), Mike Graham (6), Ken Patera (4), Roddy Piper (4), Ivan Koloff (4), Masked Superstar aka Bill Eadie (4), Terry Funk (4), Carlos Colon (3), Iron Sheik (3)

1982: CHAMPION - Ric Flair; Butch Reed (23), Dusty Rhodes (22), Wahoo McDaniel (19), Harley Race (14), Jack Brisco (12), Tommy Rich (11), Dory Funk Jr. (10), Ricky Steamboat (9), Mike Graham (7), Paul Orndorff (7), Kerry Von Erich (6), Mr. Wrestling II (5), Paul Jones (5), Barry Windham (5), Ole Anderson (4), Sweet Brown Sugar aka Skip Young (4), Roddy Piper (4), Bad Leroy Brown (4), Brett Sawyer (4), John Studd (3), Bulldog Bob Brown (3), Invader #1 (3), Carlos Colon (3), Sgt. Slaughter (3), Rocky Johnson (3), Terry Gordy (3), Bob Armstrong (3), Ron Fuller (3), Jake Roberts (3), Buddy Rose (3), Jimmy Valiant (3)

1983: CHAMPION - Ric Flair (through June 10), Harley Race (though November 24), Ric Flair (rest of the year); Ric Flair (18), Barry Windham (11), Dusty Rhodes (8), Roddy Piper (8), Greg Valentine (8), Tony Atlas (8), Billy Jack Haynes (7), Harley Race (6), Bruiser Brody (6), Butch Reed (5), Kevin Von Erich (5), Mark Lewin (5), Ricky Steamboat (4), David Von Erich (4), Mike Rotundo (3), Tommy Rich (3), Kerry Von Erich (3), Jumbo Tsuruta (3), Pez Whatley (3)

A few things stand out right away. The first is the idea that it takes years to learn how to draw money in wrestling. If anything, judging by who was on top, the opposite was the case.

Wladek Kowalski, who based on all his shots in 1950 and 1951, was likely the best drawing opponent for Thesz, had just started his career. Top contenders like Ray Gunkel, Bill Miller and Wilbur Snyder were relative newcomers to the game when they had the hottest runs of their respective careers. While all three remained stars until the death, in the case of Gunkel, and retirement, in the case of Miller and Snyder, their hottest period on a national basis was when they were breaking in. They all had something unique. Kowalski was a 6-foot-7 bodybuilder, and people looking like him were a rarity in those pre-steroid days. Gunkel, Miller and Snyder were top-notch athletes coming out of college, and in the case of Snyder, the Canadian Football League. Pepper Gomez and Gene Kiniski were also headliners from the start, Gomez a somewhat well-known bodybuilder and Kiniski a football player/wrestler. Bruno Sammartino hit the list in his third full year in the business, and Bill Watts was a headliner and top title contender very early on. It also should be noted that the champions of that era were all great workers based on the standard of the times, and were counted on to carry green wrestlers, as opposed to the idea you had to be a great polished worker to be on top if you had an aura that could draw.

Most of the names would be familiar to most wrestling fans and not be a surprise. To me, the early 50s Mighty Atlas, Morris Shapiro, was a name rarely talked about. He was a bodybuilder who evidently drew well against Thesz. I was told that when the NWA first formed, they liked him as a contender because not only did the public buy him as a contender, but they were teaching the public a lesson that wrestlers beat the physically impressive muscle heads. It's the exact opposite message that Vince McMahon re-educated fans to in 1984. This is not to same one way is better than the other. With the advent of steroids, as well as more knowledge of how to eat for muscularity, the reality was guys could be a lot more physically impressive on a wrestlers' traveling schedule. And at the end of the day, whether it was Verne Gagne, Sam Muchnick or Vincent Kennedy McMahon, the idea was to headline with matches that draw money. If it was possible for someone to look like Hogan and get over like Hogan in 1951, I'm not saying he would be made world champion, but he'd be beating just about everyone, just as Sammartino did from the start of his career as he was just learning the game.

Rito Romero was a popular Texas babyface. During the pre-Von Erichs territorial days in Texas, the top babyface often was someone built to draw Hispanic fans, from Romero to Blackie Guzman to Pepper Gomez to Torbellino Blanco to Mil Mascaras and Jose Lothario.

One of the reasons I wanted to study this was to see if it would help or perhaps hinder borderline Hall of Famers, like Hans Schmidt and Snyder. I can't say the results surprised me. I already was aware of Schmidt being a top heel. Snyder was a major star in the 50s on a national basis, who ended up homesteading in Indiana, which was not an NWA territory. He and Bruiser eventually owned the office and kept themselves as the top two babyface stars. Snyder didn't travel much in the 60s and 70s, and Bruiser was always the top star with Snyder in the No. 2 spot.

Gomez looks very good here. The thing with Gomez is he's most known for his feud with Ray Stevens and his stardom in San Francisco. But like with Stevens, during that period the office was not an NWA member so he wasn't in the title picture. The level of star he was everywhere he went pre-San Francisco, most notably Texas, and his feud with Lou Thesz over the title when they did the gimmick that Strangler Lewis had left Thesz to manage Gomez to the title was clearly one of the strongest programs of its era.

Sammartino's title challenges in 1961, and particularly 1962, would probably surprise people since he's so associated with the WWWF title. Another surprise would be Karl Gotch and Bob Orton Sr. as challengers when Thesz was champion in 1964, since Gotch is generally remembered as a great shooter who never was a top star as a pro, when, at least for a time, he was one of the biggest stars. Also notable is Danny Hodge, a junior heavyweight, being one of the top heavyweight contenders. While Rey Mysterio and Eddie Guerrero did that in modern WWF, ironically enough, Hodge was the only person holding the world junior heavyweight title who was also seen as someone who could win the heavyweight title. And if anything, Hodge's numbers were lower than they should have been because many promoters felt it wasn't a good idea to match Thesz vs. Hodge with the idea the titles should be kept apart.

An interesting note is as far back as 1958 was the name Johnny Walker, who was one of the most persistent challengers in history two decades later as Mr. Wrestling II, as well as a 1969 listing of a pre-Chief Jay Strongbow Joe Scarpa. Cyclone Negro's name hits the list big in 1971 and 1972, but there's a unique reason for that. Negro was the top heel and top rival of the Funk family, and when Dory Jr. was world champion, the Amarillo territory got more than their fair share of title matches, given the family owned the promotion.

The list also shows you the years of what I'd call super feuds for the title, Thesz vs. Kowalski in 1950 and 1951, Dory Jr. vs. Jack Brisco from 1970 to 1975, Terry Funk vs. Dusty Rhodes in 1976 and Ric Flair vs. Butch Reed, Wahoo McDaniel and Dusty Rhodes in 1982.

Reed is another interesting case, because I recall his program with Flair well. But I never thought he'd have in hindsight the kind of year he had when being the top babyface in Florida. Rhodes was out of the territory and Dory Jr. was booking, Dory Jr.'s philosophy from his father was very specific on booking and creating an ethnic star. If you make the ethnic star your top babyface, and he's got the charisma, you can create an ethnic hero. But just putting an ethnic guy on the show and keeping him strong isn't going to pay nearly the dividends. He went all the way with Reed (and with Skip Young as Sweet Brown Sugar, who was over like crazy at the time, and he never got over at one-fifth that level anywhere else), who had only been in the business three years at that point in time. Flair and Reed had tremendous matches and Reed had everything going for him, great athletic ability, agility, power, and he was impressive in the ring. I saw a match during spring break of 1982 in Miami Beach that was the best match live I had ever seen up to that point in time.

And Reed was a name player in the business for a number of years after, but was never as over as he was in Florida. He was a star in Mid-South, but he suffered from the WWF Lex Luger syndrome, in the sense he was the star who followed JYD, the guy who popped the territory and the muscular African-American, even though Reed was 20 times the

worker Dog was (but Dog was world's better as a promo and had a different level of charisma), too similar and it's just like The Rock & Roll Express didn't get over in Dallas or Memphis all that big, and The Fantastics didn't in Mid-South, you are too similar following a super over act and it's a killer trying to get over to the level of actually drawing people.

Next is a chart of all the contenders during this period. Keep in mind this is only using the stats from above. Lots of these guys had title matches plenty of years where they weren't in the top echelon, but those aren't recorded here. But this is a list again to see if there over genuinely overlooked Hall of Fame talent. Keep in mind this list is skewed heavier to the more recent guys because the farther back in time you go, the more records of matches are lost forever. Also is a category of points, which is actually the most fair way of measuring things. People are ranked based on their rank for the year. That means if there's a year we don't have a ton of info on, the wrestler isn't penalized, it's ten for first for the year, nine for second, etc. The world champion for the year gets 20 points, and if it's split during the year, it's correlated on a 1.67 points per month basis. If a top challenger leads the rest of the pack by 50% of more, they get five bonus points for the year.

Wrestler	Yrs on List	Bouts	Points
Ole Anderson	2	10	4**
The Assassin	2	20	12**
Mighty Atlas	2	18	19
Tony Atlas	4	20	15
Torbellino Blanco	1	8	10
Jack Brisco	11	89	113*
Bobo Brazil	3	22	19*
Bruiser Brody	4	20	13*
Bulldog Brown	2	11	5
Dick the Bruiser	7	45	44*
Abdullah Butcher	2	10	2*
Edouard Carpentier	4	21	20*
Buddy Colt	5	23	17
The Crusher	2	10	9*
Don Curtis	2	8	11
Dory Dixon	2	11	10
Ray Eckert	3	16	18
Bob Ellis	2	10	5***
Ron Etchison	4	13	7
Ric Flair	5	36	65*
Ron Fuller	4	15	8
Dory Funk Jr.	12	82	139*
Terry Funk	9	35	50*
Verne Gagne	3	13	18*
Gorgeous George	3	11	12*
Pepper Gomez	6	39	44***
Karl Gotch	2	11	13*
Eddie Graham	2	10	14*
Mike Graham	4	19	6
Ray Gunkel	7	32	33
HB Haggerty	2	14	15
Danny Hodge	4	19	20*
Dick Hutton	5	20	45
Rocky Johnson	4	20	6***
Paul Jones	5	36	23
Rufus Jones	3	15	8
Don Leo Jonathan	8	39	54*
Duke Keomuka	3	10	7
Gene Kiniski	11	50	116*
Killer Kowalski	5	52	43*

Killer Karl Kox	2	9	14
Ernie Ladd	3	9	3*
Mark Lewin	5	24	19***
Luther Lindsay	5	16	9
Danny Little Bear	3	11	10
Bill Longson	5	21	16*
Jose Lothario	4	17	12***
Bobby Managoff	4	17	17
Wahoo McDaniel	8	64	42*
Bill Miller	2	20	18*
Mr. Moto	4	13	9
Blackjack Mulligan	2	10	6
Dick Murdoch	8	40	37**
Cyclone Negro	4	30	21
Pat O'Connor	12	54	98*
Bob Orton Sr.	2	11	14
Roddy Piper	3	16	8*
T-Bolt Patterson	4	20	17
Harley Race	14	93	173*
Dusty Rhodes	10	112	89*
Butch Reed	2	28	12
Tommy Rich	5	46	31
Argentina Rocca	5	29	23*
Buddy Rogers	9	33	69*
Rito Romero	3	19	21
Bob Roop	1	13	9
Bruno Sammartino	2	16	13*
Hans Schmidt	6	34	41**
George Scott	2	12	17
Wilbur Snyder	3	18	20**
Pak Song	4	21	22
Stan Stasiak	2	7	11
Ricky Steamboat	5	31	18*
Sam Steamboat	3	16	18
Mongolian Stomper	4	16	8
Lou Thesz	18	64*	265*
Sailor Art Thomas	2	11	10
John Tolos	3	11	16**
Enrique Torres	7	32	32**
Johnny Valentine	11	65	67*
Fritz Von Erich	7	40	37*
Whipper Watson	6	35	48*
Bill Watts	4	22	18*
Johnny Weaver	6	27	31
Barry Windham	4	25	13***
Tim Woods	5	28	24**
Mr. Wrestling II	7	54	46**

*Denotes Hall of Famer

**Denotes on this year's ballot

***Denotes formerly on the ballot, removed for lack of support

This chart isn't meant as any kind of be-all, like a Bill James study of the baseball Hall of Fame because wrestling has so many variables. The only reason I did this was both to look at who top contenders were in that period and to find out if there is an omission. On the list, everyone who scored more than 40 points is in the Hall of Fame except Pepper Gomez (one-and-done on the ballot), Hutton, Schmidt and Wrestling II. Schmidt and II have been on the ballot for years. Schmidt has been a contender, finishing 7th in last year's voting with 52%, and if anything, this strengthens his case although I wonder if it will matter. II has gotten votes, but last year only got 20%. Considering Gomez's career also

includes his major stardom in San Francisco when it wasn't an NWA member, he may be that guy we were looking at as far as being overlooked. Hutton was not a successful draw as champion, but he was also a regular top contender before and after. If he was as lacking color and as bad a draw as his reputation, the reality is, promoters gave him the shots before and after. Certainly a lot had to do with his amateur background (one of the best college heavyweights of all-time, three-time NCAA champion with only one college loss in four years), during a period when legit backgrounds were favored by many promoters. Hutton and Gomez will be put back on the ballot and see if this makes any difference.

The 30s also brings some interesting debates. Gunkel, who was already set to debut on the ballot this year, is on, and these numbers don't take into account his long period as the top babyface in Georgia when it had its own world title, nor that he was a successful promoter. On paper he is a strong overlooked candidate. Murdoch, who has incredible support among his peers but never gets the support of historians, has a stronger case, particularly when you factor in eight years as a top ten contender and that for the majority of his career, he worked around a Japan schedule that hurt his long-term territorial pushes. Tommy Rich was a big star and his numbers look good, but he flamed out early and I don't see him as a Hall of Fame guy at all. Enrique Torres is another interesting one, and again, his seven years as a top ten contender doesn't include his world title run in Los Angeles when the Olympic Auditorium was selling out constantly in the late 40s, or the fact he had a 20 year career where he was a main eventer from the day he started until the day he left. Torres is the prime example of a superstar who, for whatever reason, time forgot. Torres also got over as a main eventer in more territories than anyone not in the Hall of Fame with the possible exception of Schmidt. But he never worked New York and wasn't a legend in St. Louis or Japan, and those histories seem to age better.

Johnny Weaver is also an interesting case. He was the top babyface in the Carolinas from almost his arrival in the early 60s, until booker George Scott revitalized the territory and phased him to the middle. When champions like Thesz, Kiniski and Funk Jr., came to the area, Weaver was always positioned as their opponent and he was the guy who would come close but never quite get it. But I don't know that he's a Hall of Famer.

As far as others, Ole Anderson and The Assassin are on the ballot primarily as tag wrestlers so their not having top numbers here isn't surprising or particularly relevant. Paul Jones is a name never on the ballot, who was a major star in the 70s. Bill Miller is in, but these numbers were actually quite a bit lower than I'd have expected for him. But he spent much of his career working non-NWA territories and was one of the biggest drawing cards in wrestling in the late 50s and early 60s during years he's not on this list because of working places like Omaha, AWA and Indiana.

Thunderbolt Patterson is an interesting name on the list, although he's at a level that doesn't put you on the ballot just based on it, similar to Orton Sr. I can't see Rito Romero getting votes, as he was a Texas superstar for years after coming from Mexico where he was a top star, but never did anything anywhere else. George Scott is actually an interesting name, and the Scott Brothers were one of the best tag teams in history, but he's probably best known more as a booker.

Snyder was actually the guy I was most interested in, because personally I've been on the fence with him. Unfortunately, this added info just told me that it wasn't strong enough to push me over the fence.. Ditto Mark Lewin, Tim Woods and John Tolos, who all had successful careers and are names I have considered for years, but never had the thing that made me think they were one of the ten strongest candidates on any year's ballot.

We had already added Spyros Arion, Batista (a very interesting candidate to say the least) and Gunkel to the ballot and based on this, I see putting Gomez back on and Hutton on. I'm also open to arguments on Lewin, Jones, Romero and Weaver from people who vote if they will vote for them, but with those names, it's probably better to wait until the 2012 ballot.

Another note when it comes to matches challenging for the NWA title, Dusty Rhodes looks to hold the record by leaps and bounds. His 112 recorded title challenges by the end of 1983 was first ahead of 93 for Harley Race and 89 for Jack Brisco. But keep in mind that Race left for WWF a few years later and Brisco left in 1984, while Rhodes was Flair's top contender and biggest drawing challenger for several more years, as he stayed on top through 1988 in the NWA, so if you figure historically, his final number would blow away everyone. Not having done the numbers, I would guess because the champion toured less and less, particularly by 1985, and was just a Crockett promotions champion, which meant a far fewer number of viable challengers with Rhodes being the biggest draw of all of them, Rhodes and Flair are very likely to, particularly circa 1986, have worked more with each other than any championship program in NWA title history. Also due to the far fewer number of contenders and it being a one promotion champion, that if you figure the transition of the title to WCW (correct in the real world, but not technically correct), that Sting may end up near the top in title matches, plus he was a multi-time champion.

AUGUST 10, 2011

In the next part of our Hall of Fame series, when looking at the history of the NWA world heavyweight title, one of the things you can look at to determine who were considered the best performers had to do with doing 60 minute draws in championship matches.

Generally speaking, and there are exceptions to every rule, during most of the title run, going 60 minutes meant you were considered a pretty good wrestler as far as a worker goes, because if you weren't, going 60 minutes could be the kiss of death to a show. In addition, that also meant you were a top guy because until the title belt started getting prostituted in booking in the mid-70s when Jim Barnett took over booking the champion from Sam Muchnick, promoters were limited to how many 60 minute matches they could book the champion. But in addition, as time went on, particularly starting in the late 80s, these types of matches became rarer and rarer because the title meant less and attention spans were also less.

Before doing 60 minute draws, as best we can tell, the longest title matches of the NWA era (and in this case we are using the period from the first convention in 1948 until the title was dropped in 1991 and became the WCW title, after which 60 minute matches were almost never held. The AWA and WWWF title had occasional 60 minute matches, but we don't have as complete records and they were far more rare. It should also be noted that records are incomplete, and at best, these numbers are probably closer to 50 to 70 percent of what the real numbers would be. But here are the leading 60 minute men of that era.

Lou Thesz 215
 Harley Race 120
 Dory Funk Jr. 118
 Ric Flair 85
 Pat O'Connor 64
 Gene Kiniski 62
 Jack Brisco 56
 Whipper Billy Watson 36
 Terry Funk 31
 Buddy Rogers 31
 Dick Hutton 23
 Wilbur Snyder 15
 Ricky Steamboat 14
 Kerry Von Erich 14
 Don Leo Jonathan 14
 Enrique Torres 14
 Wahoo McDaniel 12
 Johnny Valentine 13
 Dusty Rhodes 11
 Johnny Weaver 11
 Orville Brown 11
 Verne Gagne 11
 Luther Lindsay 11

Dory Funk Sr. 10
 Barry Windham 9
 Giant Baba 8
 Bruiser Brody 8
 Magnum T.A. 8
 Jumbo Tsuruta 8
 Ilio DiPaolo 8
 Pepper Gomez 8
 Argentina Rocca 8
 Bobby Managoff 8
 Rocky Johnson 7
 Fritz Von Erich 7
 Billy Robinson 7
 Danny Hodge 7
 Dick Murdoch 6
 Mr. Wrestling II 6
 Ray Gunkel 6
 Dick the Bruiser 5
 Edouard Carpentier 5
 Lonnie Mayne 5
 Ron Miller 5
 Paul Jones 5
 Killer Kowalski 5

It's actually quite amazing since these numbers are not complete that it's likely Thesz had at least 300 world title matches that went more than an hour during his career. And that's just from 1949 on, since Thesz held versions of the world title actually dating back to 1937.

The people with the most draws in title matches not in the Hall of Fame are Dick Hutton, who looks like a strong candidate as the guy was a champion, but also a major contender for years before winning the title, Wilbur Snyder (always a leading contender), Kerry Von Erich (the thing that kills him is longevity, as he was absolutely having a Hall of Fame career through about 1985, but fizzled out from there), Enrique Torres (one of those guys who every single indication is that he was a top of the line guy, main eventer everywhere and top contender and what kills him is history forgot him), Johnny Weaver (a Carolinas star for a long time), Orville Brown (the original NWA champion) and Luther Lindsay (who has to be one of the most underrated wrestlers ever, as the guy had a great reputation as a genuine wrestler, clearly must have been able to draw because in those days putting an African-American on top was touchy because of the inherent racism in the public, let alone make him a top title contender), Barry Windham (similar to Von Erich), Magnum T.A. (An auto accident ended his career), Ilio DiPaolo (the Buffalo wrestling hero), Pepper Gomez (who is another person who when looking at these records come across as a far bigger star than he's remembered, because by the 70s, he was really long past his prime and that's where most people saw him, but from 1955-65 he was one of the biggest stars in the game).

The longest NWA title matches on record were 90 minutes, and those with more than one 90 minute title match were Lou Thesz (9), Rito Romero (4), Pepper Gomez (4), Pat O'Connor (4), Whipper Billy Watson (2), Buddy Rogers (2), Jack Brisco (2) and Dory Funk Jr. (2).

It was 30 years ago this month that Sam Muchnick, the St. Louis promoter, held his final show. Muchnick was arguably the most powerful figure in pro wrestling during most of the period from about 1950 until 1975, as both the president of the National Wrestling Alliance for most of those years, as well as the booker of the world champion and the promoter for what, during a lot of that period, was when it comes to visibility and popularity within his market, among the best pro wrestling cities in the world.

Muchnick, who passed away on December 30, 1998, at the age of 92, is really the only promoter in modern history who truly left on his own terms and timetable while really at the peak of his success. There was a somewhat rough spell in the late 70s, when business was okay, but hardly through the roof. But in his last few years, things were as good as they had ever been, with stars like world champions Ric Flair and Harley Race, and a cast ranging of long-time legends who had been around and on top seemingly forever such as Dick the Bruiser, Pat O'Connor,

Jack Brisco and Dory Funk Jr., newer stars in their prime like King Kong Brody (who didn't use the name Bruiser Brody in the city out of deference to Dick the Bruiser), Dick Murdoch, Rocky Johnson and Ken Patera, youth in the form of The Von Erich Brothers, David in particular being a huge drawing card, Ted DiBiase and Butch Reed, along with regular appearances from the biggest stars in the business at the time like WWF champion Bob Backlund, Andre the Giant and Dusty Rhodes.

It was a unique promotion. Sam Muchnick in many ways was similar, but in most ways was the opposite of Vince McMahon. Muchnick, while a successful promoter, never had the kind of financial clout McMahon had, and certainly had nowhere near his ambition. Muchnick had a life he enjoyed, and working as a wrestling promoter was a part of it, but hardly defined him. He was a major player in the city, supporting local causes, hanging around the race tracks, or the baseball and football games, living in a social circle with the area's sports leaders of the time, the owners and General Managers of the franchises and the cities most powerful media figures. For years, he actually shut down operations in the summer, not even taping television, and putting tapes from other NWA promotions in his time slot. This built for the opening of the new season in the fall, and exposed his fan base to new talent around the country that they could bring into the mix. The reason is that he didn't want to work that hard in the summer, and would rather attend baseball games. As the business changed, they ran more often in the summer, but it was always a slower schedule. Instead of promoting a circuit, like virtually every promoter, he ran one city, with live shows and television tapings every few weeks. He was proud that after a few rough years at the start, when he finally started rolling in the late 40s, even during periods of depression for the business and when he didn't have any television, he never had a money losing year, and rarely had money losing shows. Yet, he paid talent 32% of revenue, and he and Paul Boesch were known as the best payoff men in the business. Most promoters were paying 15-20%, and some of the smaller territories may have paid more on a percentage basis, but those cities weren't doing the grosses St. Louis was doing.

The two differed in the sense Muchnick wanted to make money, but he also wanted to be respected in town. Wrestling was a key part of the local sports community. His television show, "Wrestling at the Chase," during a boom period in the early 60s was held in the Khorrosan Room, an exquisite ballroom. The tapings drew a mostly adult audience, men in suits and ties, women in evening gowns, sitting at tables with fine dining. It was downright classy. In that environment, the characters who built the show, like Dick the Bruiser, Gene Kiniski, Fritz Von Erich, O'Connor, Rip Hawk and Cowboy Bob Ellis stood out even more.

As president of the NWA, he was conservative, very protective of the results of the world champion, who could do disputed finishes, but always had to win his feuds at the end. He was the referee in territorial border disputes. He tried to keep promoters from veering too far into illegal activities, often without success. There was frustration, at times in the early 60s, during a debacle when Buddy Rogers was world champion and he didn't have control of booking Rogers, who was working primarily for Vince McMahon Sr., and not going to a lot of the territories, a number of territories created their own world champions. There was a war of wills with Vince McMahon Sr., who Muchnick got along with socially, but he called back Lou Thesz, then 46, as a shooter, to get the belt back from Rogers. After a lot of manipulations and game playing, but against the wishes of McMahon, Thesz beat Rogers in Toronto to win the world title, leading to McMahon Sr. leaving the NWA, calling his new promotion the WWWF, and having Rogers as world champion until he dropped it to Bruno Sammartino.

But by the early 70s, the NWA was at its most powerful. Its champion was recognized by promoters all over the world. Promotions in Mexico, South America, Australia, Europe and Japan were part of the alliance. Even McMahon Sr. came back, and was no longer allowed to bill his WWWF champion as "world champion," as part of the deal. While Verne Gagne, who ran the AWA and was its champion, was not an NWA member, he still came to alliance meetings and was on friendly terms with the promotion. As much as could ever be possible, there was a cohesive nature to the business. All of this started to crumble in 1975, when a power play, based on promoters wanting to save on the 3% booking fee Muchnick would get from every show the champion appeared on (Jim Barnett agreed to book the champion and not take a fee), things happened at an NWA meeting that caused him to resign as

champion. But he still was one of its most influential members until he got out of the business.

After the death of his wife, Helen, Muchnick, then 76, decided he would finish promoting with a show on January 1, 1982, at the Checkerdome. The Muchnick retirement show was, many would say, the high point in the history of wrestling in the city's history. He was one of only two promoters, Paul Boesch in Houston being the other, where they drew a sellout crowd just based on the promoter doing his final show. Despite it being one of the biggest days of the year for football, many of the biggest names in the community, from politicians to media figures, were at the final show as well as the post-show party honoring Muchnick and January 1, 1982, was named Sam Muchnick Day by then St. Louis mayor Vincent Schoemehl.

St. Louis had a little more than one year as what many would say was the wrestling capital of North America, an era that ended really on February 11, 1983, when, in the aftermath of a Ric Flair vs. Bruiser Brody match, St. Louis Wrestling Club General Manager, Larry Matysik, Muchnick's protege, who doubled as the television announcer and was co-booker with Pat O'Connor, quit the company and, taking Brody with him, promoted on his own. His company was short-lived when he was negotiating for KPLR-TV, the station that aired "Wrestling at the Chase," the television show Muchnick started in 1959 and was a local institution, and found a surprising competitor for the slot, New York promoter Vincent K. McMahon, who was looking to expand his company nationally, and had already started promoting in California when the NWA offices run by Mike LeBell and Roy Shire had closed up.

The television station General Manager urged a compromise after agreeing that due to falling ratings and a poor television product, that they were going to cease their affiliation with the St. Louis Wrestling Club that Muchnick ran, effective at the end of 1983. He urged Matysik and McMahon to work together, and Matysik worked for McMahon as the local St. Louis promoter until the early 90s, by which point it was a completely different business and locally produced television was a thing of the past.

The St. Louis Wrestling Club business weakened greatly by late 1983. They had a hot period in 1985 when Ric Flair was drawing sellouts with Kerry Von Erich and Brody, but soon those ended up being the only matches that could draw, and after being done to death, they stopped drawing big crowds as well.

By early 1986, the St. Louis Wrestling Club was no more. The NWA brand continued but it was the regular NWA touring shows promoted by Jim Crockett and booked by Dusty Rhodes. Even though Ric Flair was actually the best drawing world champion the NWA ever had during his 1981 to 1983 run, the Crockett shows never drew all that well.

By this point, crowds for both the WWF and NWA shows were embarrassingly bad, as the city's fans grew up on a certain form of pro wrestling and weren't buying what either of the major companies was presenting. Muchnick always remained neutral, because he had friends on both sides. He would say he would never go against Matysik, but he also would not go against his former partners and his former company, which he sold his stock to the quartet of Harley Race, Bob Geigel, Pat O'Connor and Verne Gagne. When the St. Louis Wrestling Club folded, and Vince McMahon had a meeting with Matysik about what could be done in the city, Matysik suggested a one-night Sam Muchnick tournament and loading it up with wrestlers and doing it the old St. Louis style. The tournament, which came down to Harley Race pinning Ricky Steamboat, saw the Muchnick name draw a sellout, more than triple of what both major companies were doing at the time. In 1990, when Jim Herd, who was the director for Wrestling at the Chase and also friends with Muchnick, asked him to attend Starrcade in the city, and presented a Pat O'Connor Memorial tag team tournament, it drew the largest NWA crowd in the city since 1985. Muchnick made one last public appearance, on October 5, 1997, for the Badd Blood PPV run by WWF, which set a city record with 21,151 fans, a show promoted locally based on the fact that 92-year-old Muchnick and many of the world champions of the past, Jack Brisco, Dory Funk Jr., Terry Funk, Gene Kiniski, Lou Thesz and Harley Race would be there. That had its own political issues, as Jim Cornette scripted tributes to all of the men, but Kevin Dunn insisted they all be called "local stars" on the WWF broadcast, even

though every one of them were touring world champions and among the biggest stars in the history of the industry. It was the last time most of them saw Muchnick.

Muchnick was the promotional assistant to Tom Packs, the man who made St. Louis into a wrestling capital in the 1920s, including promoting the famous Joe Stecher vs. Strangler Lewis match in 1928 that was the meeting of the two biggest stars of the era who had worked as world champions for rival promoters and that at the time, everyone in the business thought was going to be the ultimate shooting match for the title (it was worked match that everyone agreed upon ahead of time that Lewis would win). After a falling out over money, when Muchnick worked his ass off promoting a major boxing title fight for Packs and only got a \$200 bonus when the fight did huge business, and finding out that Packs' partners thought he should be cut in for more and it was Packs who made the call not to do so, Muchnick quit. He began promoting in opposition to Packs briefly in 1942, but was not successful and the promotion closed when Muchnick served in World War II. He reopened after the war in 1945, at a time Packs was doing huge business with Wild Bill Longson, one of the greatest drawing heels of all-time and generally considered the biggest drawing card in the history of the city, as his headliner. Muchnick took the tact of trying to compete using mostly shooters, from the almost completely blind 54-year-old Strangler Lewis, former champion Ray Steele (who once represented pro wrestling in a boxer vs. wrestler match in St. Louis, winning in about 30 seconds) to Olympians Ed Virag and Roy Dunn, NCAA champion Cliff Gustafson (the first great University of Minnesota heavyweight to be a pro wrestling star), football legend Bronko Nagurski and Lee Wyckoff. He slowly built his crowds from 3,700 to more than 6,000 on good nights, but that paled in comparison to Packs' crowd with Longson and the pre-Nature Boy Buddy Rogers (it should be noted that Longson vs. Rogers drawing 17,621 fans in 1946 shows the myth that Rogers was a copy of Gorgeous George, or that George was the first bleached blond star with robes, since George didn't even become that a big star until television in 1947 (although he used the name and was actually a regular headliner for Muchnick in 1946 and 1947 doing in the range of 3,000 to over 6,000 fans. But Rogers, who took the Nature Boy name later after a 1947 song by Nat King Cole, was a bigger draw and a superstar first.

Muchnick began faltering in 1946 as Packs was hot with his big three of Longson, Rogers and Lou Thesz. The turning point came in 1948, when Muchnick was one of the founders of the new version of the National Wrestling Alliance (the name had been used in Kansas dating back to 1940 but the national organization was formed in 1948), an alliance of various promoters, some powerful, and some not, with the goal of creating one world champion. The media at the time always made fun of pro wrestling's plethora of world champions. But it was really about talent sharing, and Muchnick maneuvered well. Al Haft, one of the era's most powerful promoters out of Columbus, OH, who booked Rogers, was convinced to join the alliance. With Muchnick as the St. Louis rep, this meant Rogers switched sides. Rogers was such a big star at the time that he was the key to almost instantly turning around of Muchnick's business. Both sides were doing well, but Packs had outside business debts and sold his company to a consortium headed by Thesz. After a some battling, Thesz and Muchnick, who had been friends since the 30s when Muchnick would go on the road with Thesz as world champion and the two would play handball together in local gyms on the road. His job was to make sure Packs (who booked the title) got the right percentage of the gate, and sometimes worked as the referee for the title match, agreed to pool resources. It was presented to the public as if there were two competing companies, one publicly headed by Martin Thesz (the public face since it would look bad if Lou Thesz was the owner and world champion) and the other headed by Muchnick, but in reality they were co-owners of both companies, with Muchnick owning 51%. It wasn't a worked promotional war and the promotions used much of the same talent. Eventually they gave up the idea of presenting it as two different promotions to the public.

Historian Scott Teal in a bio on Muchnick said, "One could safely say that Sam Muchnick made more of a positive impact on professional wrestling than anyone, promoter or wrestler." I don't know if I would go that far, but he was probably the single most influential person in the industry for 25 years. The period had its ups and downs, largely based on the changing technology of television, both being victimized by early overexposure, learning how to make television work, and a rebirth with the growth of UHF television stations on a regional basis. This is not to

say Muchnick was not part of dirty backroom dealings. But publicly, he always kept his reputation clean in the community. He and Thesz battled often, usually about Thesz being booked on small shows, flying coach as world champion, or being booked on shows with gimmick matches and the arduous schedule. He and the alliance were late in working with Japan and Australia when they became wrestling hotbeds, not thinking past the U.S. and Canada. Most of the promoters only cared about their own business and had no worldwide view of the game. Muchnick had a North American view, which was more than most. In the early 60s, there was a movement to rotate the presidency of the NWA to get different minds in charge, and that nearly killed the organization, particularly when Rogers, then booked by Vincent James McMahon, became world champion. Muchnick's ability to outfox McMahon and get Rogers to lose to Thesz put him back in power as the head of the NWA in 1963, a position he maintained for the next dozen years.

Muchnick always presented African-American wrestlers with a different mindset. In a racially diverse city, it wasn't until the mid-60s when African Americans ever main evented. Some questioned that when Ernie Ladd became a big star at that time, that he wasn't given world title matches that others who were over as much would have gotten. On the flip side, Muchnick protected the African-Americans that he didn't give the main event opportunities, with a mentality of only having them lose when necessary. No African-American wrestlers were ever considered for the NWA title during the Muchnick era, although the flip side of the argument is that one couldn't name one who on paper would have been a better choice during the time than the people who dominated the belt. Bobo Brazil was a good attraction and a superstar, but really not the level of worker they wanted the champion to be. Bearcat Wright was a great draw when given the ball. But he developed a reputation in the business that severely damaged his career. Wright was made world champion in Los Angeles, the first African-American to hold what was at the time one of the major world championships. But Wright refused to drop the title to Edouard Carpentier, and later shot and refused to drop the title to Fred Blassie. Wright then left town with the belt when he found out Gene LeBell was going to be his opponent in a title match and he was coming for real. So Wright as champion was someone they wouldn't even consider. Others just weren't the level of stars.

Matysik, whose next book will no doubt be controversial, out this coming summer, "The Definitive Shoot: The 50 Greatest Pro Wrestlers of All-Time," wrote about that final event.

Even the newest pro wrestling fans have probably heard Don McLean's classic song American Pie. How many have sung along when McLean voiced the lyrics about, "A long, long time ago . . . that music used to make me smile." And particularly to the point, "Something touched me deep inside, the day the music died."

Well, McLean could also have penned lyrics that clicked for many fans and even participants about a part of pro wrestling that was special and actually died when Sam Muchnick in St. Louis presented his retirement card 30 years ago, on January 1, 1982. Thirty years ago! In retrospect, with many a bump and swerve in between, that was the day a certain part of pro wrestling died in some vital portion.

Truthfully, the fact that the program drew a record sellout crowd of 19,819 to what was known then as The Checkerdome is inconsequential. Actually, the lineup itself matters little, though it had many major names of the period. This baby was going clean even if ring announcer Mickey Garagiola met Larry Matysik in the main event, because it was Sam's farewell to wrestling and St. Louis. More notably, what passed away was the demonstration and proof that this bizarre business of pro wrestling could aspire to and achieve a higher stature than most mainstream media and the general public would admit.

Granted, St. Louis was the odd duck even in the so-called territory era. Muchnick was the promoter of a stand-alone town that cherry-picked the best names from various areas and featured them in St. Louis. Minority partners in Muchnick's St. Louis Wrestling Club often provided St. Louis the boys to fill out first-class shows with strong undercards. Additionally, Muchnick had come out on top of a bruising promotional war with longtime promoter Tom Packs in St. Louis in the late 40s and that created a strong persona not to mess with.

Yes, he did concentrate on his role as chief power and usually president of the National Wrestling Alliance (elected president every year from 1950 to 1960, and again from 1963 to 1975), which helped keep a rowdy bunch of independent small businesses (the territories) in some sort of order. Sam had connections in both the media and political realms that made him the quiet ruler of the mat world. In the end, usually, Sam got what he wanted.

Indeed, I did work for him from my high school days in the mid-60s as a "go-fer" to finally becoming the commentator for "Wrestling at the Chase," handling all the marketing, running the office, and eventually being involved in the booking. I learned the business from Sam, and those who populated the St. Louis scene. But I'm not a so-called "mark" for Sam.

He had his flaws, played politics and manipulated within the business, looked out for his own town, protected his personal reputation, and built a power-base by making pro wrestling more than it had ever been anywhere else. In other words, Sam Muchnick was a hell of a businessman who fully understood what made his field and his town tick in his day and time.

Sort of like Vincent K. McMahon right after him . . . but without the flash. The business changed, as it was going to, whether Muchnick retired or not. And it may be changing again today, as Vince hits his mid-60s. This is the natural progression of the world. And I do give Vince his due as the greatest pro wrestling promoter of all time. But Muchnick was the guy in his time.

At any rate, because of the way the St. Louis promotion educated its audience and booked its performers, the town had a special niche. In some ways, it is forgotten now because it was only one town and not a territory, so fewer folks are around to remember the good times or sing the praises of the television and house shows.

But ask Dory and Terry Funk, ask Harley Race, ask Ted DiBiase, ask Jerry Brisco, ask even a Bob Costas from the media side . . . ask any of those who understood that what happened in St. Louis had great depth; the business itself along with its performers had a respect from the general public and media unmatched anywhere else thanks to how Sam ran the show from top to bottom, in every detail . . . do not insult the intelligence of your loyal audience or the general public . . . never false book nor lie to either . . . keep control of the carnival and violent sides so that less can mean more when a hot angle is shot . . . demand a strong, competitive style . . . be open to new aspects of television and marketing . . . protect the championship as the Holy Grail so that it alone means something . . . build rivalries between true stars so that what happens matters . . . educate, educate, educate in a friendly, colorful, relaxed manner . . . pay your bills and be a professional in all circumstances representing a business that some want to scorn . . . This list can go on and on with simple but effective tools.

By New Year's Day 1982, Muchnick had been phasing out somewhat locally and definitely within the NWA, which had become a shaky and crumbling structure. Yet in the town, pro wrestling was unique and consistently, incredibly successful.

When I asked a couple of local personalities to perhaps make an appearance at the card to congratulate Sam, my phone went nuts.

"I want to be there too!" was the constant refrain. Before long, a cast of characters (from major sports, the media including newspapers to television to radio, and from the police, the mayor and the governor's offices) was assembled to honor Sam's farewell.

And that was just the public side. The private party afterwards showed even more of society as the wrestlers from the card mixed with the most famous and powerful people both locally and, in some cases, nationally. They wanted to be there. Nobody had to be paid.

From my perspective — from a promotion perspective — it was the most satisfying and successful effort ever. I've written before how, as my wife and I gave them a ride back to the Chase Hotel late that night, Gene

Kiniski and Verne Gagne sang to us, "There's no business, like show business."

It was the greatest night ever. And it was the saddest night ever. For pro wrestling was entering a different phase, a period of upheaval and change. This side was dying. Not right, not wrong, not better, not worse. Just different.

Isn't it sad that nobody has yet figured out how to take the best of what St. Louis offered and put it with the best of what WWE offers? Somewhere in there is a potential bombshell, not that WWE needs it. Yet.

So forgive me if I put a little twist on it when I hear Don McLean sing about, "the day the music died." I was there for the day pro wrestling died, here, just a little bit — thirty years ago.

SAM MUCHNICK'S FINAL SHOW

JANUARY 1, 1982 - ST. LOUIS CHECKERDOME

ATTENDANCE: 19,819 - CITY ALL TIME RECORD FOR
ATTENDANCE AND FOR LIVE GATE

1. Bulldog Bob Brown DCOR Jerry Brown
2. Wendi Richter & Joyce Grable won 2/3 falls from Sandy Parlow & Early Dawn
3. Pat O'Connor (in what was billed as his retirement match) b Bob Sweetan
4. Crusher Blackwell won handicap match over Butch Reed & Ox Baker, pinning Baker
5. Dewey Robertson b Von Raschke (Jim Raschke in St. Louis was billed as Von Raschke, and not Baron Von Raschke, because Muchnick would say, "Is he really a Baron?")
6. David Von Erich & Rufus R. Jones DDQ Harley Race & Greg Valentine
7. Dick the Bruiser (the city's most popular wrestler of the past two decades) b Ken Patera to win the Missouri State title for a third and final time)
8. Ric Flair won 2/3 falls over Dusty Rhodes to retain the NWA world heavyweight title with Gene Kiniski as referee

DECEMBER 23, 2013

Randy Orton beat John Cena in what WWE for all of about three weeks had tried to promote as the biggest match in the history of the company, with the idea that for the first time since the Lou Thesz era, there would be an undisputed world champion.

As time goes by, championships have become more and more simply props. They don't really mean anything. They don't really draw. The idea of prestige, or drawing power, or for that matter money, which the world championship position in boxing and pro wrestling meant, have changed with time. Boxing had eight titles, with nothing bigger than the heavyweight title, the holder being a household name that all sports fans would know off the tip of their tongue when asked.

Boxing titles haven't meant a thing and are frequently talked about as Alphabet Soup titles. UFC titles were the last to be devalued, and they still have a measure of prestige. But in going from five a few years back to nine, the drawing power of the championship match has taken a real hit, particularly this year.

As far as pro wrestling goes, it's almost comical that in a fixed sport, how much the belt has meant historically. When Sam Muchnick headed the NWA in the 50s, and they tried to present it as sport, the big joke about pro wrestling is how could it be a real sport when there were five different guys claiming to be world heavyweight champion. Now, the idea that there is more than one world champion constitutes that something isn't a real sport is almost absurd. In MMA, every company in existence claims its titleholder as the world champion. In boxing, any sanctioning body has a list of a dozen or more world champions. The nature of modern pro wrestling, with autonomous promotions in full control, makes the idea of an undisputed world champion in pro wrestling impossible. And it makes it seem almost ridiculous that such a thing was actually the goal of promoters, thinking it added to the legitimacy of the business.

I'm not sure what that has to do with things past the point that WWE tried to sell a PPV based on the concept of creating an undisputed world champion, in an industry where every single promotion of any size, and many of no size, claim one.

Just as silly, it would be decided in a TLC match, by climbing a ladder, in a PPV on 12/15 at the Toyota Center in Houston. It just felt wrong, like they were insulting the audience in trying to proclaim the main event as the biggest match in the history of the company, and among the biggest in history. The match was on a PPV show that would not be expected to do all that well. And it came with a few weeks of build-up, and mostly out of nowhere. In doing so, they attempted to present Cena and Orton as the two greatest wrestlers of this generation, in a dream match.

The match was built using history, even if history had to be changed a lot. The world title belt that Cena held was presented as the same title that George Hackenschmidt beat Tom Jenkins for in 1905, as opposed to a title created in 2002 when Eric Bischoff handed it to HHH on an episode of Raw.

The explanation of the WWE title was that there was a match where Buddy Rogers defended the world title against Lou Thesz, both claimed to be winners, so both claimed the championship and the WWE belt started from that WWWF title. There was no dispute who won between Thesz and Rogers, and the other explanation, that Rogers beat Argentina Rocca in 1963 to become the first WWE champion is linking it to a match that never happened. Rocca was Capital Wrestling's big drawing card of the late 50s, but he ended up leaving, going to work for Jim Crockett Sr., and they attempted to run in the Northeast, with no success. Rocca was a famous name to be buried for leaving, and it was claimed Rogers won a tournament in Rio de Janeiro one week on television when he showed up as the WWWF champion.

In the creation of the match, the fact WWF had done this before, a dozen years ago in San Diego, when, with the purchase of WCW, they had extended the championships of WCW and WWF, and unified them in a one-night tournament won by Chris Jericho, who was billed as the Undisputed world champion, a title that bounced around for less than a year before Bischoff handed HHH a belt to have two different champions. It was surreal with the promotion pretending that never happened and that for the first time in 50 years, the titles would be brought together. In the world of social media, John Layfield addressed this by saying that Jericho's title was the Undisputed title, which this match would determine the first WWE world champion. So after asking fans two weeks ago to vote on a name for the new title, they picked the most logical name, and one that they never even submitted to the fans to pick from.

The real story started in 1961. Rogers was the NWA champion, having beaten Pat O'Connor at Comiskey Park in Chicago before 38,622 fans setting what was the all-time gate record of \$141,000. The NWA had wanted the title on Rogers since 1957, but Lou Thesz refused to lose to him because he felt he wasn't a real wrestler, and personally didn't like

him. You'd find few people aside from Rogers' clone cronies that he took care of who liked Rogers, although even his enemies would grudgingly respect him as one of the best performers inside the ring, and magic at the box office. As much as Thesz didn't like him, Bruno Sammartino didn't like him even more.

Rogers, as champion, was being booked by Vince McMahon Sr. and Toots Mondt. Even though the NWA champion was supposed to work all the territories, only the largest promotions were able to get dates on Rogers, who McMahon Sr. and Mondt would book mostly within their own territory.

By 1962, the NWA was falling apart and correspondence from Sam Muchnick, the President, indicated he was just about ready to throw in the towel, feeling his goal of gaining respect for pro wrestling by having one world champion was falling apart. The NWA bylaws were that member promoters could not bill anyone but the NWA champion as the world champion. But unable to get dates on Rogers, several NWA offices were creating their own champions. Gene Kiniski went to West Texas and for Stu Hart as world champion. Georgia created its own world champion. Ohio recognized Karl Gotch. Fred Blassie was recognized in Georgia. The AWA (based in Minneapolis) and WWA (based in Los Angeles) already had their own champions.

The NWA board in 1962 made the decision that to save the alliance, since promotions were ready to pull out over not getting dates on Rogers, they had to get the belt off Rogers. Thesz, who was working as a free agent, was called, at 46 years old, to be the answer. Because Thesz had been NWA champion from 1949 to 1957, during the days of wrestling on network TV, his name alone brought an aura of credibility. Plus, Thesz had a reputation as a real submission wrestler, and he was among the most feared men in a world of tough guys. Even at his age, his reputation spoke for itself and that was part of the reason he was the guy chosen. It was well known Thesz didn't like McMahon or Mondt, and disliked Rogers even more. Strange things kept happening. Rogers got injuries whenever he was about to be booked with Thesz, missing a couple of title change dates.

After a broken ankle in Montreal just before a scheduled title change, as quickly as they could after Rogers came back, they set up Rogers vs. Thesz in Toronto. Rogers was told that if he didn't come and drop the title, his \$25,000 deposit (a huge amount of money at the time) would be released and given to charity. All the bigwigs came to Toronto for the showdown, including McMahon, Mondt, Muchnick and other promoters. Muchnick came with \$25,000 in cash, to give to Rogers upon completion of the job. Muchnick told Rogers that he would, as a show of faith, give the cash to McMahon, Rogers' booker and promoter, to show he was getting his money. Rogers told Muchnick that he would just assume Muchnick held onto the cash and gave it to him personally when the match was over.

When they got in the ring, and this was according to Rogers, Thesz came up to him and said, "We could do this the hard way or the easy way." The verbiage was legendary, as legend had it that Strangler Lewis, Thesz's mentor and idol, used the same words to Ed Don George in 1931 in Los Angeles when Lewis felt promoter Paul Bowser had double-crossed him, since Lewis dropped the title to Gus Sonnenberg with the promise Sonnenberg would lose it to him, only to have Bowser have Sonnenberg lose to George.

There were no problems in the ring. Thesz beat Rogers on January 24, 1963, in Maple Leaf Gardens. He also beat Rogers in a rematch two weeks later.

Thesz had not proven to be a draw in the Northeast. Thesz would say he was never promoted correctly, and in that era, it was built around tag teams and Rocca, and the title was not even a distant second. They would say Thesz's straight-laced style didn't fit with their largely ethnic audience. Rogers, on the other hand, was a huge draw for them.

McMahon and Mondt went with the idea they would just pretend the Toronto match never happened and bill Rogers as champion. The title had been so fragmented that they would just be one of many places claiming their own world champion instead of using a traveling champion

voted upon by a conglomerate of promoters. The fly in the ointment was the wrestling magazines and the newspapers, who McMahon tried to get to pretend the Thesz-Rogers match never happened.

Stanley Weston, the leading magazine writer, was in Toronto and shot footage of the title change, and refused to not print the pictures and pretend the title change never happened, starting a rift with McMahon Sr. Because both really needed the other, they did exist on working terms for two decades until the WWF ceased relations with Weston's magazines.

In 1965, McMahon and Muchnick, who even after the fallout, remained friendly, went to put together a deal. Thesz was by this point 48. He beat Gotch in Ohio and Tarzan Tyler in Georgia to get rid of those title claims, and worked in West Texas and Calgary, so the Kiniski title was forgotten about.

McMahon's champion, Bruno Sammartino, was becoming an iconic figure. The deal was presented to have the biggest match in wrestling history, a closed-circuit extravaganza to unify the two leading championships. Sammartino was going to win. Thesz was promised that a year later, the favor would be returned. He didn't trust that it would happen, so he asked for \$100,000 in cash, a ridiculous figure, because he didn't like the idea of losing to McMahon and Mondt's guy. At the same time, Sammartino refused the win. He saw the schedule they had designed for him, where he'd not only have to work all the major cities in the Northeast, but in all the NWA territories as well. So the match never happened. In 1971, McMahon rejoined the NWA, and as part of the deal, the WWWF world champion became just the WWWF champion, although it was just a semantic term and fans didn't think any differently. But in the 70s, in the WWWF's own programs sold in the arenas, they did list the NWA champion as the world champion, even though it was very rare that they came to the territory.

The world heavyweight championship dates back to May 4, 1905, in a match in Madison Square Garden where George Hackenschmidt, the European champion, beat Tom Jenkins, the American champion. The world title claim was given to the foreigner to lose to Frank Gotch, on April 3, 1908, in Chicago. Gotch was America's first mainstream pro wrestling superstar, and to this day is perhaps the most influential wrestler in history.

Gotch was the hero in the state of Iowa, so popular that wrestling became huge in the culture. To this day, Iowa and Iowa State are wrestling powerhouses, and some of the greatest wrestlers the country ever produced came from that state. Gotch never lost the title, as injuries ended his career before he could have a showdown with Joe Stecher, the heir apparent.

There were a number of title claimants in the wake of Gotch no longer defending. But by 1920, Strangler Lewis emerged as something close to an undisputed champion, until a split in 1925 when the Stecher camp pulled a double-cross, as Stanislaus Zbyszko shot on the Lewis camp champion, Wayne Munn, beating him for the title via submission, and then switching camps and dropping it to Stecher. In 1928, peace was made between the camps and Lewis beat Stecher in a famous St. Louis match which people from all over the country came thinking would be a shoot between the two top guys, but instead, a business deal had been reached for Lewis to win.

Even so, New York and Illinois' athletic commissions wouldn't recognize Lewis, and by the 30s, multiple champions existed.

The closest thing to an undisputed champion was Thesz from around 1952 to 1957. Thesz was the National Wrestling Association champion, given that he was able to get business partners to buy the Tom Packs promotion in St. Louis, which controlled the belt. The National Wrestling Alliance was a series of opposition promoters, who met about talent sharing and recognized Orville Brown as champion.

Muchnick and Thesz, both from St. Louis, and friends dating back to the 30s, were now battling each other as rival promoters. They secretly merged promotions (Martin Thesz, Lou's father was publicly listed as the

promoter for one group and Muchnick for the other, but the shows by 1949 were all actually being run by Muchnick), and for credibility, one world champion would be created for both promotions. Brown was to beat Thesz, with the idea Thesz would get it a year later. But Brown's career ended three weeks before the unification match in an auto accident, and history changed. Thesz became the unified NWA & NWA world champion.

With Muchnick's ability as a diplomatic leader, and Thesz's credibility and charisma, the NWA grew and became the sanctioning body of pro wrestling. But the NWA title itself can only be traced to 1940 as the name of a minor world championship recognized by the Kansas City office, and as far as being a national touring champion, to 1949 when the NWA started gaining steam as a national entity. By 1952, Thesz was generally considered world champion almost everywhere of significance. Muchnick hung with sports people who liked him, but made fun of wrestling. On TV one night from Los Angeles, there would be one world champion. Another night from Chicago, there would be another. In St. Louis, there was Thesz. He was able to convince people that for the good of the business as a whole, there should only be one, and everyone would prosper from a touring champion anyway because the champion would come in and be special as opposed to a guy you would have in your territory every night. Thesz was never quite undisputed champion, but they were able to unify several claims, notably in the 1952 Thesz vs. Leone match in Los Angeles. Thesz was recognized in virtually all of North America, in Mexico, and Japan, as well as other parts of the world. Virtually everywhere else in the world that there was pro wrestling, even places he didn't appear, he was generally recognized in that era as the real world champion.

Things fell apart in 1957 when Thesz lost to Edouard Carpentier, and then Carpentier's promoter, Eddie Quinn, quit the NWA. Thesz got it back and then quickly lost to Dick Hutton, since Thesz himself had asked out of the schedule and wanted to book himself on his own terms in places like Europe and Japan. Carpentier then was used in a number of places, including Boston, Los Angeles and Omaha, to lose his version of the title and create various world championships.

The Los Angeles version became the WWA title, which in roundabout ways led to the Georgia and Indiana titles. The Omaha title in a sense led to the AWA title, created in 1960 when Verne Gagne bought the promotion from Tony Stecher, the brother of Joe Stecher. They created a TV angle where it was announced that Gagne had not had a title shot at the NWA belt for years even though he had been a top contender, and if Pat O'Connor (NWA champion) didn't defend against him within 90 days, Gagne would be declared world champion. There was never an attempt to get O'Connor in, and Gagne was declared the AWA champion.

The NWA, AWA, WWWF and WWA were the big four titles in the 60s. Really, the AWA was not big three early on, since it was really just Minnesota based. But as it expanded, it became one. The success of pro wrestling in Australia under Jim Barnett, which became the strongest and best paying circuit in the world in the mid-60s, created the IWA title. In Japan, the JWA used the International title as the supreme belt. When Sammartino (WWWF champion) and Kiniski (NWA champion) came to Japan, they were challengers for Baba's title and not the other way around.

Muchnick was largely able to somewhat change things. In 1968, he got the Los Angeles promotion to join the NWA, and WWA champion Bobo Brazil gave up recognition after a 60:00 draw with NWA champion Kiniski. San Francisco, which did not recognize a world champion, also joined the NWA at that time. Dory Funk Jr., as NWA champion, started defending his title in Japan, making the NWA belt the supreme belt there. McMahon Sr. rejoined the NWA. Barnett also was admitted to the NWA, a tougher road because a lot of the promoters didn't want to allow Barnett, who was gay, into the alliance, even though he was running the most successful territory in the world at the time. Barnett dropped recognition of his IWA world title and the NWA champion started appearing. New Japan joined the NWA, and its NWF world title dropped the world as part of its designation, although the AWA champion came to the IWE and later the WWF champion came to New Japan. While Gagne never joined the NWA, he would attend the alliance meetings and during the 70s there was actually something of cohesion among

most of the major entities. And there were offshoots, like in Indiana, where Dick the Bruiser always had his own world title belt he claimed creation of when he was the WWA champion in Los Angeles, dropped the title, and then returned home, took over the promotion in a hostile takeover from Barnett, and made himself champion.

Of course, everything changed in the 80s. The NWA and territories were obsolete. Every promotion had its own world champion.

FEBRUARY 10, 2014

A couple of notes from Bruno Sammartino about the 1965 attempt to unify the NWA and WWWF championships with a Sammartino vs. Lou Thesz closed-circuit match.

While there were several NWA vs. WWWF championship matches in the late 70s and early 80s, including Harley Race vs. Superstar Billy Graham, a number of Race vs. Bob Backlund matches and one Ric Flair vs. Backlund match, before the wrestling war started, all were draws and DQ finishes, and there was never any talks in that era of actually unifying the titles.

In the 60s, things were different in the sense that Sam Muchnick always believed that for the credibility of pro wrestling, there should be one world champion because in those days, that was what was made fun of.

Vince McMahon Sr. and Capital Wrestling had left the NWA in 1963 over the dispute as they wanted Buddy Rogers to retain the NWA world championship, while NWA President Sam Muchnick had gotten so much heat from NWA territories who couldn't book Rogers and were wanting to drop out of the NWA and create their own champion. The Calgary and Amarillo territories used Gene Kiniski, and the Ohio and Georgia territories also created their own world champions, even though it went against NWA bylaws, because they couldn't get dates on Rogers. So they had the showdown where Thesz beat Rogers in Toronto on January 24, 1963.

By 1965, Sammartino had been WWWF champion for a couple of years and had established himself as a major drawing card. He was 29 years old and Thesz was 49.

There were a series of meetings involving McMahon, Joe "Toots" Mondt, who was the other major stockholder in Capital Wrestling, Muchnick, and a fourth person, who Sammartino said he believed to have been Bobby Bruns (Muchnick's booker in St. Louis at the time, so that name would make sense). Sammartino said he was not invited to any of the meetings, although he knows that Thesz attended one or two of them.

The decision was made to go with Sammartino as champion. At the meeting, McMahon and Mondt expressed that for their major arena shows, they had built the territory up to where they needed Sammartino or they wouldn't draw well, and they said they needed him 17 or 18 dates per month. Well, that was the same deal with Rogers a few years earlier that led to the split. Muchnick said that they could make the deal, but the NWA needed 16 or 17 dates which they could spread out, because the NWA cities were built on a concept where the champion was a special attraction who didn't appear on every show, although Muchnick liked to get him eight or so times a year. Of course, that schedule looked impossible.

Sammartino said he spoke with Phil Zacko, who was a shareholder in Capital Sports and the promoter in Philadelphia, who told him about what was being discussed and that they wanted to make him the unified champion. Sammartino wanted to make clear that the issue wasn't where he worked, as he had no problem as far as cities, but the issue was the number of dates.

Zacko ended up arranging a meeting with Sammartino, Zacko, McMahon, Mondt and Willie Gilzenberg (a boxing and wrestling promoter out of New Jersey who was the figurehead WWWF President

and another shareholder). At the meeting, Sammartino was told that they literally wanted him on the road every day defending the title because so many cities needed title matches and they would work out the cities. Sammartino said that he would do the schedule under one provision, and that was that he needed every Sunday off to be with his family, that he almost never saw. So that cut the potential dates down from 30 or 31 a month to 26 or 27. Sammartino noted that Mondt, after he said that, said to McMahon, that he told him that unifying the titles wasn't a good idea.

Thesz, in his book, stated it fell apart on his hand at the meeting because he demanded a \$100,000 guarantee to drop the title. He was also told that after one year, he would get it back, but he didn't trust that was the case, hence he wanted the guarantee. Sammartino said that he never heard of that demand from Thesz, but said he was told only that Thesz wanted to be guaranteed return matches with Sammartino at all the major arenas all over the country. But the issue fell apart from there and no match was ever booked, nor was there even a match booked between the two where they would go to a draw and both would keep their titles.

In 1971, McMahon rejoined the NWA, and his champion, Pedro Morales, was billed as WWWF champion instead of WWWF world champion. The McMahons were NWA members until 1983, when at the meeting that year, Vincent Kennedy McMahon, Vincent James McMahon and Jim Barnett (by then their Director of Operations after being forced out of his former position of running the Georgia promotion) all quit the NWA. They didn't state why, but it was because Vincent Kennedy McMahon, who had taken over for his father, who was dying from cancer, although nobody knew that at the time, was planning on expanding nationally. But it was that period, where the WWWF title and later WWF, was always called "WWF champion," instead of world champion, which is why they almost never used the term "world" for the championship as time went on.